STANLEY CUP PLAYOFFS 2025

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EDMONTON SUPERSTAR READY FOR ANOTHER RUN

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Leon Draisaitl has stepped up with a(nother) Hart Trophy-caliber season to lead the Oilers as they chase their first Stanley Cup of this era. And Edmonton fans should thank their lucky stars that he puts hockey above all else. Otherwise, he might be wearing another team's colors. **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

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EDMONTON SUPERSTAR READY FOR ANOTHER RUN

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SUBSCRIPTIONS **Minimum one-year subscription price:** $39.95 including tax for print and digital; $29.95 including tax for digital. • The Hockey News (ISSN 0018-3016) publishes 12 issues per year, including Money and Power, Yearbook and our Champions Collector's Edition. **Mail In Canada:** The Hockey News, PO Box 23022, Brantford, ON N3T 6K4
Mail In the US: The Hockey News, PO Box 904, Buffalo, NY 14240-9554

PRINTING RBW Graphics, 2049 20th Street East, Owen Sound, ON N4K 5R2

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The Hockey News was co-founded by Ken McKenzie and W.V. Cote in 1947.

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IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THINGS UP

BARRING AN UNFORESEEN SWING in fortunes, the order of playoff teams in the Central Division was already set by mid-March. The Winnipeg Jets had a nice little cushion as the No. 1 seed, while injuries to Minnesota and reinforcements in Colorado and Dallas meant that the Avalanche and Stars were close to a lock as first-round playoff opponents. That's right: two of the biggest winners of the NHL trade deadline were on an early collision course.

The fact that Mikko Rantanen is now a member of the Stars instead of the Avs makes the matchup delicious, but it would also rob the field of a legit Stanley Cup contender in the first round. The same can be said in the Atlantic Division, where one of Florida, Toronto or Tampa Bay is guaranteed to be knocked out in seven games or fewer because two of those titans will have to face off against each other.

No playoff format is perfect, but it's time for a change in the NHL. And since this is our Playoff Preview issue, let's talk about it. The divisional format was fun, but after years of seeing the same teams clash early on, it's beginning to wear thin – just ask Edmonton and Los Angeles, who will most likely meet in the first round for the fourth season in a row.

The easiest solution? Let's go No. 1 vs. No. 8 in the conference. In this scenario, Dallas would draw Los Angeles, and Colorado would take on Edmonton. Not too much of a step down, but at least it's different. In the East, those three Atlantic powerhouses would all draw teams from the Metropolitan.

Now, if you're going to win the Cup, you're always going to face elite opponents eventually. Truly, even the second-round matchups now feature eight of the NHL's best squads, where anyone could win. But the regular season is long, and there should be some reward for being at the top of the pile after 82 games. Going 1 vs. 8 won't always solve that – Dallas had to play Vegas in the first round last year after the Golden Knights slipped to the wild card – but more times than not, it would be a reward for the teams that earned the most points in the standings.

And to innovate even further, let's include a play-in game/series. Expanded post-season formats have come into MLB, the NBA and the NFL in recent years, and it's time the NHL follows suit. First and foremost, we'd have to consider what adding games to the schedule would mean – but let's assume that a play-in format that added anywhere from one to three games to a team's schedule would be welcomed by all involved. The NHL has featured 16 teams in the playoffs since 1979-80, when the league was made up of 21 teams. That meant five franchises were left out in the cold, but, typically, those were terrible squads. Now, we still have 16 playoff teams out of 32 franchises, meaning only half the league gets an invite to the big dance. Think about it: how different are the Ottawa Senators from the New York Rangers or Columbus Blue Jackets this season? We're likely looking at one team making the playoffs by one point or a tiebreaker over another. That's a tough pill to swallow, as Detroit could attest last season, but it doesn't have to be that way.

We all love the playoffs, so it's finally time to have more of them. No. 8 vs. No. 9, with everything on the line – with the No. 1 seed awaiting the winner. H

STEVEN ELLIS/THE HOCKEY NEWS

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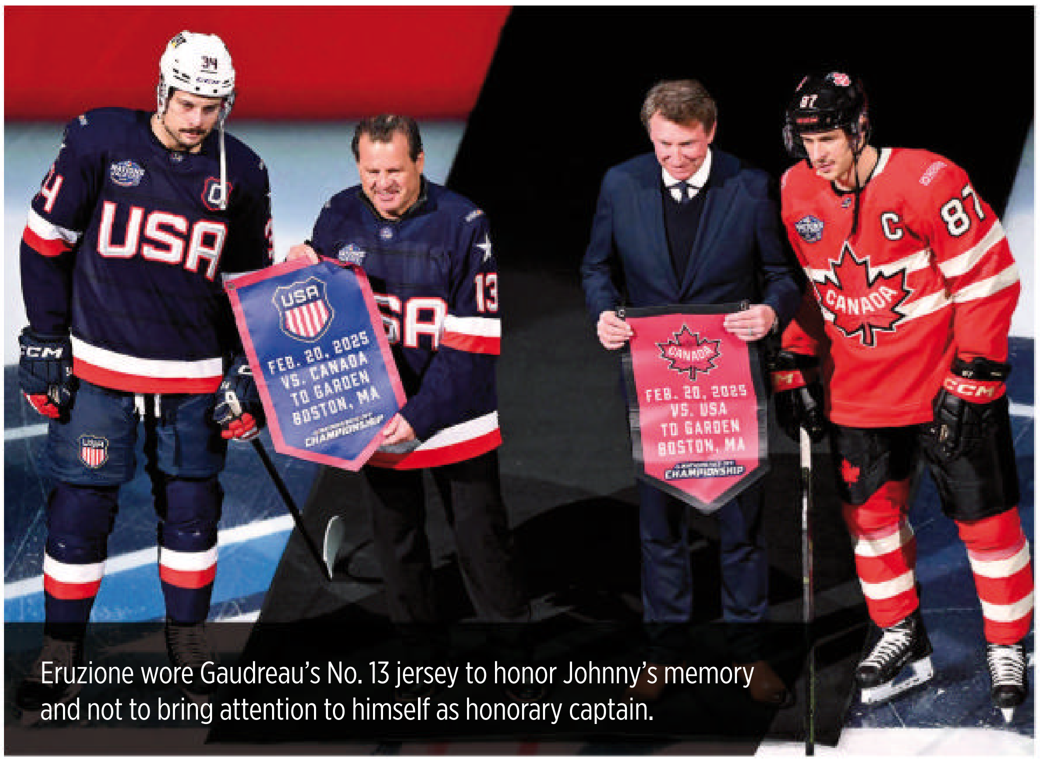
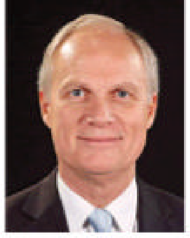

Eruzione wore Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey to honor Johnny's memory and not to bring attention to himself as honorary captain.

[PUBLISHER'S NOTE]

WITH W. GRAEME ROUSTAN | LINKEDIN.COM/IN/ROUSTAN



PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Canadians Are Polite Especially Gretzky

FATHER FRANK PORTELLI OF St. Michael's Cathedral Basilica in Toronto preached in a mid-March Sunday mass essentially saying Canadians are polite and respectful people, and while we are under attack by the American president, Canadian citizens must stand strong together and remember that we are also citizens of heaven.

Canadians are often teased about how polite we all are to everyone. I am afraid that Canadian politeness toward each other has diminished recently, as I have seen some impolite comments from some Canadians against one Canadian, the 'Great One.'

Wayne Gretzky has politely and respectfully accepted every invitation of every prime minister of Canada and president of the United States from any political party since the 1980s, except when it conflicts with a family event. He politely accepts invitations to more than 100 events each year, many of which are fundraisers, and, yes, he gets his picture taken with hundreds of people each year. Every self-serving politician wants to have Gretzky at their event, and more than anything, they want to use their picture with Gretzky for their own political agenda.

I assure you Gretzky doesn't support the politics of each and every one of those people in the pictures. Being the polite Canadian he is, he never turns down a request for a picture no matter what political stripes they wear. Being the typical Canadian, he believes in everyone's right to their own beliefs, even if he may not agree with them. As should all Canadians. That's just being polite.

The 47th president of the United States has repeatedly insulted most Canadians (including me) with his talk of Canada becoming the 51st state and referring to Canada's prime minister as governor. As a U.S. citizen as well, I believe strongly in the territorial integrity and respect of all countries' international borders, so this talk only promotes instability around the world.

The president blindsided Gretzky by dragging his name into this 51st-state rhetoric, clearly without Gretzky's knowledge or permission. Prior to him mentioning Gretzky's name, Canada was united when it came to Gretzky being a great Canadian. Now, some Canadians upset at the president's insults are taking shots on their own net by being impolite toward Gretzky for something he had absolutely no part of.

Then, the NHL asked Gretzky, and he politely accepted, to be the honorary captain of Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off. The NHL didn't give him a jersey to wear before they sent him down the tunnel next to the bench of the U.S. players, furthest from the Canadian bench yet closest to the predetermined faceoff circle. Gretzky, as instructed, walked along the black carpet that the NHL laid out in front of the U.S. bench all the way to the faceoff circle. Gretzky, being the polite Canadian that he is, acknowledged the U.S. players as he walked by, just like he has done hundreds of times before with players from all over the world. Remember when he even invited the Russian team that he fought tooth and nail against in the 1987 Canada Cup back to his Brantford childhood home for a barbecue? Canadians call that good sportsmanship, and it is the polite thing to do.

Mike Eruzione, the honorary captain of Team USA, wore Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 jersey to honor him at the ceremonial faceoff. The jersey, which hung in Gaudreau's stall in the U.S. dressing room, was worn by Eruzione as a sign of respect to Gaudreau's absence from the team and senseless death last summer. The wearing of the jersey was to honor Gaudreau and not about Eruzione's role as honorary captain, and Gaudreau's family really appreciated the moment.

The other three honorary captains would have diminished that respectful display had they arbitrarily thrown on their countries' jerseys. The respect that all players from all teams paid to Gaudreau was what that was all about. There was never a plan for the four honorary captains to wear their countries' jerseys. Eruzione just did it on his own for Gaudreau. That was the classy thing to do, and the fact that the other three captains allowed it to be a solitary moment for Gaudreau and his family was even classier.

I have seen firsthand just a very small piece of the good that Gretzky does every day for Canadian families. After I moved Canada's only hockey-stick factory from Hespeler to Brantford, Ont., Wayne and his brother Glen approached me with a plan to get free hockey sticks into the hands of Canadian kids in need. Wayne and his team, led by Darin Cleary in Brantford, gave me a license to use Gretzky's name on Northland hockey sticks in exchange for donating hockey sticks to Canadian families in need.

The plan was that I could offer these youth hockey sticks for $99 for a set of three and the 9.9-percent license fee would be paid out in free sticks to be sent out to Canadian kids and families in need chosen by the Wayne Gretzky Foundation. There was one condition that Gretzky insisted upon to this deal, which I am now violating: Gretzky wanted his contribution of thousands of dollars worth of free sticks each year to Canadian kids and families in need to remain confidential. He absolutely wanted no attention or mention of this good deed. Sorry, Wayne, I broke our agreement, which is not polite on my part.

Whether or not you agree with which politician Gretzky gets his picture taken with, what tunnel he is told to walk down, how he acknowledges athletes from around the world or what other captains do to honor a fallen hockey player, all Canadians should remain polite and respectful to one another. After all, that is how the world sees us Canadians, polite and respectful, and we should demonstrate that now more than ever as citizens of Canada and citizens of heaven when it comes to the very polite Gretzky.

W. Graeme Roustan

W. Graeme Roustan
Executive Chairman & Publisher, Roustan Media Ltd.
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ONE AND ONLY
Colorado's Makar was a unanimous choice as the Conn Smythe Trophy winner in 2022.

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NHL

PICKING THE PLAYOFF MVP

'It's a legacy-defining award.' Take a peek at the process for selecting the winner of the Conn Smythe Trophy, which is perhaps hockey's most undervalued honor **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

AMONG ALL THE AWARDS the NHL gives to its players, the Conn Smythe Trophy for most valuable player in the playoffs might be the most underappreciated. It's certainly the most unique. Its design is awesome – even though it looks like you could take your eye out with that thing if you don't handle it properly – and it's the only individual bauble that gets presented to the sweaty winner in the moment, right on the ice. Unless, of course, you're so understandably distraught at losing Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final, as Connor McDavid was last spring when he declined to come out to receive it.

But there's something unique and incredibly lasting about being judged to be the best player in the best league in the world at a time when the games are the most important. Nobody will ever be able to take that away from Jonathan Marchessault or Cam Ward or Jean-Sebastien Giguere or Butch Goring. They will always be cool.

Just as the award is unique, so is the process for selecting the winner. As is the case with the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke, Lady Byng and Masterton and first- and second-team all-stars, the winner is determined in a vote by members of the Professional Hockey Writers' Association. Unlike the other awards, it is a much smaller group of electors, and the process is completed much more quickly and without as much time for contemplation.

The field of voters has been expanded in recent years and now includes between 15 and 20 voters, who are selected by the executive committee of the PHWA, in this case president Frank Seravalli and executive vice-presidents Emily Kaplan and Chris Johnston. The panel is a cross-section of hockey writers who cover the post-season, typically with two voters each who regularly cover the teams playing in the Stanley Cup final. The PHWA tries to include at least one voting member from a European outlet and two from Quebec-based media organizations. The remainder is made up of national media members.

The way the vote works is voters must have their ballots submitted with 10 minutes remaining in the third period of any clinching Stanley Cup final game. If the Cup final is not decided on that evening, it moves to the next game. The votes are passed on to the NHL, which tabulates the totals, based on five points for a first-place vote, three for a second and one for a third.

With voters having to submit their ballots with time still remaining on the clock, that raises the question of what happens in the case that the game is close or tied in the third period. "If that's the case, voters can say on their ballot, 'If this team wins, this is the winner and if the other team wins, this is the winner,' " Seravalli said.

While the vast majority of voters are those who are in attendance covering the final, it's not a hard and fast rule. And

The Oilers' McDavid, right, took playoff MVP honors last spring despite falling to Florida in the Cup final.

while a player's performance in the Cup final goes a long way toward determining the winner of the Conn Smythe – there has never been a winner whose team has not played for the Cup – voters take the first three rounds into account. (When this writer has had the privilege of voting for the Conn Smythe, he has devoted 50 percent of his vote to the player's performance in the first three rounds of the playoffs and 50 percent to the final.)

There has never been a tie in voting for the award. If that happened, the win would go to the player with the most first-place votes. The second tie-breaker would be second-place votes. You could make the case that the award could've been split between Pittsburgh Penguins goalies Matt Murray and Marc-Andre Fleury in 2017, when Fleury backstopped the Pens to their victories in the first two rounds before giving way to Murray, who led the Penguins in the Eastern Conference final and Cup final. (When this exact scenario was proposed, the league sent out instructions to voters that they could not be voted upon as a tandem.)

As has been the case since 2018, the PHWA has made the results of the Conn Smythe vote public, as it has with all the NHL awards upon which it votes. The only unanimous vote was in 2022 when Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche captured all 18 first-place votes. Last season, McDavid received 16 of 17 first-place votes (Sergei Bobrovsky received the other). The closest voting since the results were made public was in 2020 when Victor Hedman of the Tampa Bay Lightning beat teammate Brayden Point by just four voting points, taking nine of 18 first-place votes, while Point took eight. (The other one went to Nikita Kucherov.)

Of the 52 players who have won the Conn Smythe Trophy since it was first awarded to Jean Beliveau in 1965, 37 have either been inducted or will likely be enshrined into the Hall of Fame. So winning it is definitely a big deal. "It's a legacy-defining award," Seravalli said. "And we take voting on it very, very seriously."

TWICE AS NICE

Crosby is one of three players to capture the Conn Smythe in back-to-back post-seasons.

To be sure, the perception of a player can hinge on his post-season performance. Consider 2016, when Phil Kessel led Pittsburgh in both goals and points in the playoffs, but Sidney Crosby took the first of his back-to-back Conn Smythes. What if Kessel had won the award that year? Would that, along with his three Stanley Cups and status as the NHL's ironman, be enough to make him a first-ballot Hall of Famer rather than a borderline candidate? If Jordan Binnington had taken the award in 2019 with the Blues, as some suggested he should have over Ryan O'Reilly, would his place in hockey history be more secure? There is the perception that Chris Pronger, then of the Edmonton Oilers, was robbed of the Conn Smythe when his team extended the Carolina Hurricanes to seven games in 2006, which would have made him the only player in NHL history aside from Bobby Orr to register career wins of the Hart, Norris and Conn Smythe Trophies.

As important as the Conn Smythe is, it doesn't provide a golden ticket to the Hall of Fame. Just ask Claude Lemieux and Justin Williams. Both made careers out of scoring enormous playoff goals and elevating their games at the most crucial time of the season. They each have a Conn Smythe Trophy as a receipt, yet neither seems to be in serious consideration for enshrinement.

As you can guess, a large percentage of the winners are goalies. Led by Patrick Roy and his league-record three playoff MVPs, 14 of the 52 winners have been netminders. Twenty-seven have been forwards and 11 have been defensemen. And if you're looking for consecutive Conn Smythes, it's a good idea to play for a team that is based in Pennsylvania. Only three players have won the trophy in successive years – Bernie Parent of the Philadelphia Flyers and Mario Lemieux and Crosby of the Penguins. It also helps to be from Canada, since all but 10 winners, and the past three straight, are Canadian.

Regardless of where the player who ultimately wins in 2025 was born or what position he plays, you can be assured that he'll be deserving of the honor. For the most part, the writers get it right.

MCDAVID: JIM RASSOL-USA TODAY SPORTS; CROSBY: BRUCE BENNETT/POOL PHOTO VIA USA TODAY SPORTS

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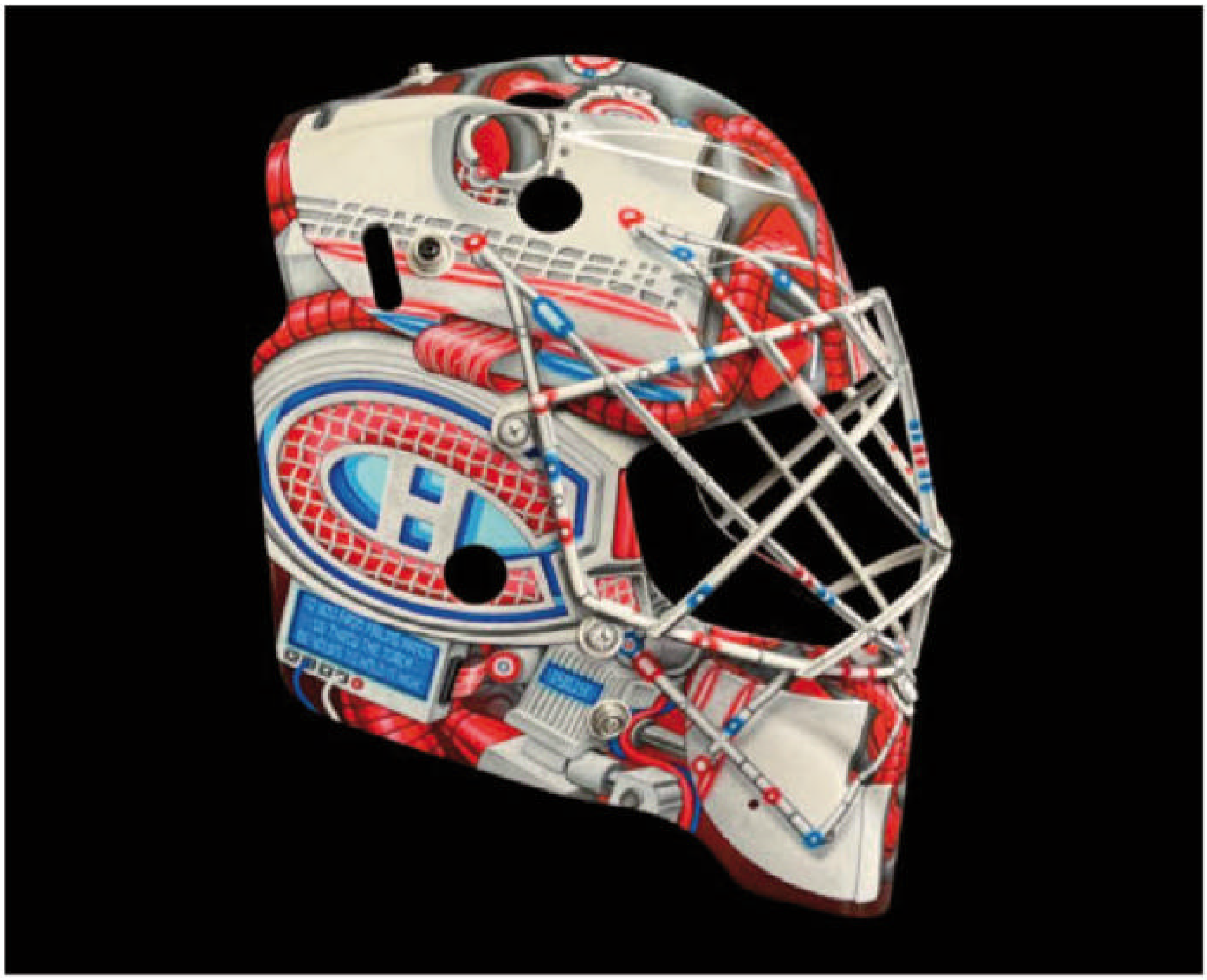
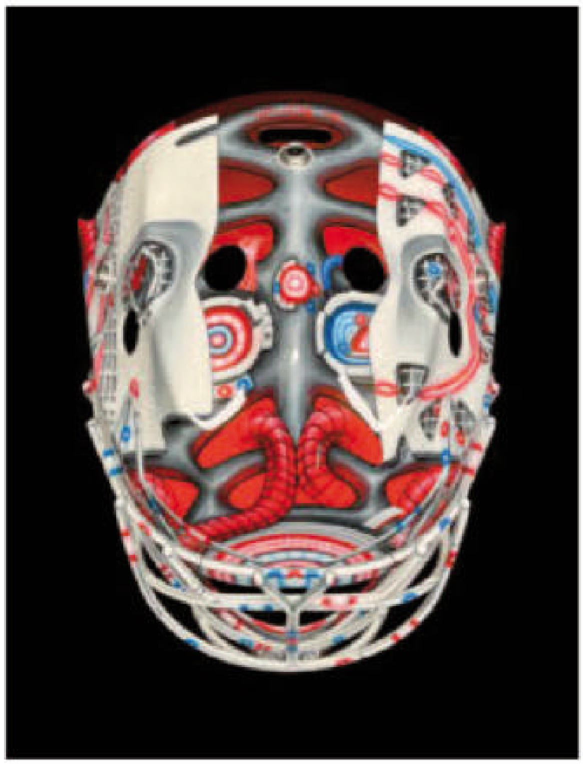
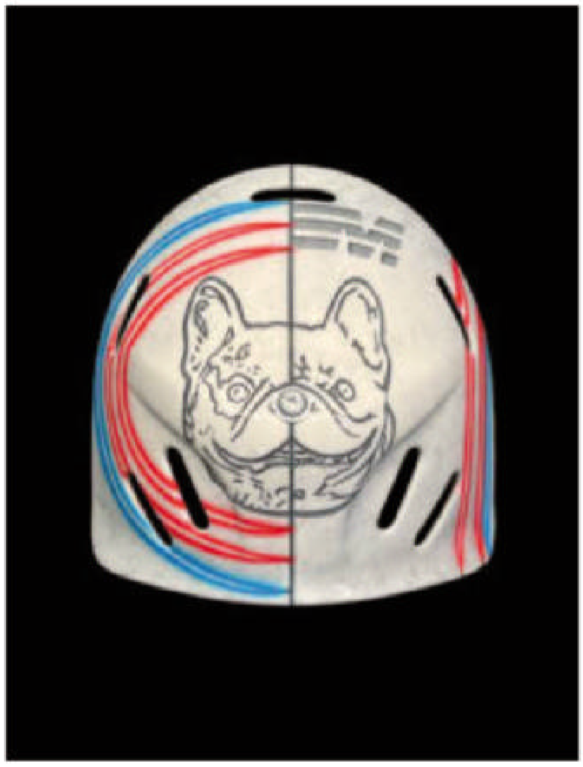
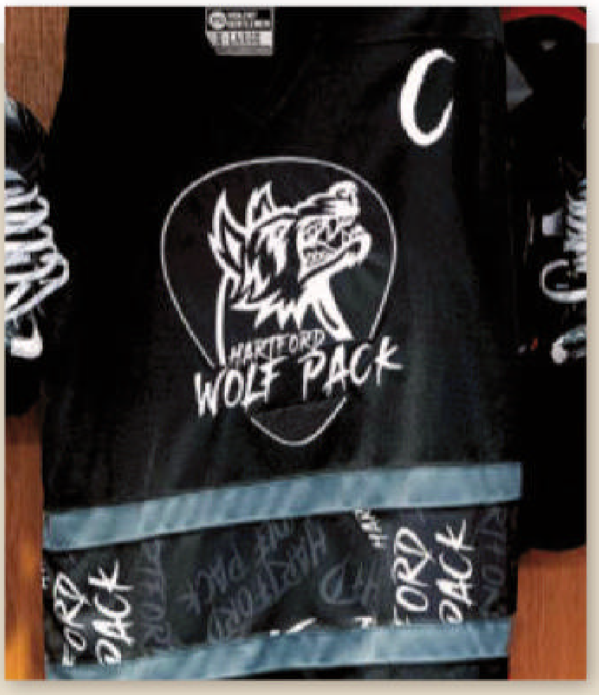






SAM MONTEMBEAULT | MONTREAL CANADIENS

WITH SAM MONTEMBEAULT BEING born and bred in Quebec, his hockey heroes weren't so much chosen as preordained. Growing up a goaltender, it bordered on compulsory for Montembeault to lionize Jacques Plante, Ken Dryden, Patrick Roy and Carey Price. And with the help of Jordon Bourgeault of JBo Airbrush, Montembeault has brought those Canadiens crease giants into the future. This cyborg-head design, a nod to a former Price motif, cobbles together pieces of the iconic fiberglass masks worn by Plante and Dryden, with intricate wiring connecting to circuit-board messages that pay homage to Canadiens history. On the left jawline, "1993" is displayed in honor of Montreal's most recent Stanley Cup victory, while "1909" on the opposite side honors the franchise's founding. On the right panel is the longest message: "To you from failing hands we throw the torch" – which is a line from John McCrae's famous war poem *In Flanders Fields* that's displayed outside Montreal's dressing room. **– JARED CLINTON**



CASEY FITZGERALD

Jersey HOUND

HARTFORD WOLF PACK | 2024-25

EMO IS HAVING A moment in hockey. The oft-derided subgenre of punk is old enough to inspire nostalgia, and several teams have had fun with that recently. Vegas hosted 'Emo Knight' early in the season, with classic bands Saves the Day and Senses Fail in attendance. The AHL's Cleveland Monsters also made an Emo jersey but didn't wear it during the game. Hartford took the next step and actually played in their Emo sweater, which, of course, was black. The skull and heart secondary crests are a great touch, and the fonts certainly fit the brief. Now all we need is for the Winnipeg Jets to do a Morrissey/Josh Morrissey night. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

MASK: JORDON BOURGEAULT/JBOAIRBRUSH.COM; JERSEY: JOHN MRAKOVCICH/HARTFORD WOLF PACK

HEARTBREAK-O-METER

Many believe 'Game 7' are the two best words in sports, but that isn't the case for fans of these teams. Among NHL franchises to have played at least five Game 7s in club history, these six have the worst records **BY JARED CLINTON**

RYAN MILLER
JOE SAKIC
JOHN TAVARES

OTTA-WAH

> OTTAWA SENATORS
0-6 (.000 W%)
It was gutting when the **ERIK KARLSSON**-led Senators came within one goal of reaching the 2017 Stanley Cup, losing Game 7 of the East final to Pittsburgh. But the extended playoff drought that followed has made it even more painful.

HERD TRAMPLED

> BUFFALO SABRES
1-6 (.143 W%)
The Sabres have lost two Game 7s in overtime, four by one goal and haven't made the playoffs since losing Game 7 of the first round in 2011 – when Lindy Ruff was still in his first tenure as coach.

NATIONAL DISASTER

> WASHINGTON CAPITALS
5-12 (.294 W%)
A dozen of Washington's Game 7s have come in the **ALEX OVECHKIN** era. He's scored in four of those, but just one resulted in a victory – the 2018 conference final that preceded the Stanley Cup victory.

FOWL OUT

> ANAHEIM DUCKS
3-6 (.333 W%)
Among the Ducks' six Game 7 defeats are four in as many years, from 2013 to 2016. Persistence paid off, however, as **NICK RITCHIE** scored the winner when Anaheim defeated Edmonton 2-1 in 2017.

ABOMINABLE RECORD

> COLORADO AVALANCHE
6-10 (.375 W%)
The defending champs won Game 7s in the first and second rounds in 2002 before getting flattened 7-0 by Detroit in Game 7 of the West final. The seven-goal loss is the most lopsided in Game 7 history.

ISLE OF LOSING

> NEW YORK ISLANDERS
4-6 (.400 W%)
Even with their poor record, the Isles will always have the 'Easter Epic' Game 7 win over Washington in 1987. Astonishingly, New York didn't play a single Game 7 during their 1980s dynasty run.

KARLSSON: MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES; MILLER: KEVIN HOFFMAN-USA TODAY SPORTS; OVECHKIN: MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES;
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In the CARDS

TOPPS DOES NOT HAVE the license to make NHL trading cards, but since 2019-20, it has issued a set of stickers and an accompanying album. For 2024-25, Topps has increased the size of its annual NHL Sticker Collection from 685 to 800, making it the largest set of hockey stickers to date. Old-school fans will appreciate that All-Star stickers are designed to look like the 1974-75 Topps and O-Pee-Chee sets, while Rookie Stickers resemble the iconic 'Gretzky rookie card design' of the 1979-80 sets. Packs include four regular stickers and one silver foil sticker. Blue foil parallels (serial numbered out of 100) are found one in every 25 packs, red foil parallels (numbered out of 10) are found one in every 250 packs, while the elusive gold foil parallels (numbered 1/1) are found roughly one in every 2,500 packs. **– SAL BARRY**

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'I LIVE'

Pagonis says that Radar, the Isles' first Puppy with a Purpose, has helped her regain her sense of independence.

NHL

ON THE UP AND PUP

Following the example of the Islanders, more NHL teams are joining the 'Puppy with a Purpose' program **BY WILLIAM ZIMMERMAN**

IT'S ALL IN THE eyes, the velvet ears, the indomitable tails. The 'Puppy with a Purpose' program sells itself.

In 2018, the New York Islanders became the first pro sports team to buy into the Guide Dog Foundation's training, fundraising and awareness campaign. In the ensuing years, the initiative has spread to half a dozen other major-league teams across the U.S. "The Islanders could have very easily told us, 'We're doing this, you need to be exclusive to us,' " said foundation president John Miller. "They did the opposite. They encouraged us to build as big as we could."

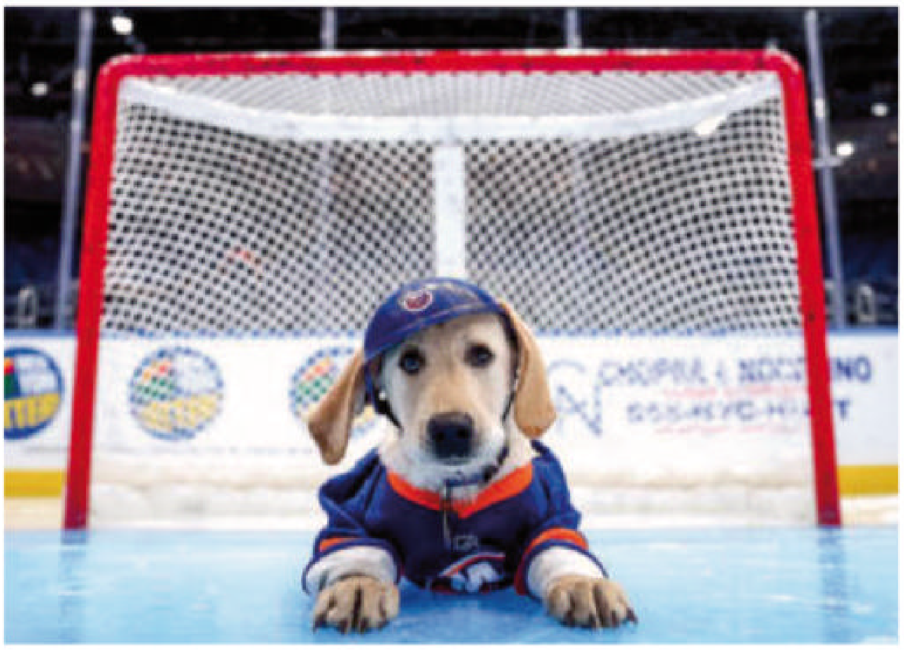
Dogs raised through the Puppy with a Purpose program represent just a fraction of the 3,000 service and guide animals placed over the years by the Guide Dog Foundation and America's VetDogs, a spin-off nonprofit formed in 2003.

Now in its 79th year, the Guide Dog Foundation works with more than 1,600 volunteers nationwide. While most of their dogs have been reared in traditional homes, about 45 pups have grown up in a bustling arena, stadium or news-and-production set. "There's no better socialization experience," Miller said. "You've got the sights, the sounds, the smells, the crowds." Added Islanders senior director of community relations Ann Rina: "The puppies turn into mini-celebrities."

Strutting around the arena concourse or sliding across social-media feeds, Butchie, the Islanders' fifth pup, is a walking, wagging, unabashedly adorable ambassador for the foundation. Photos are great, and there are plenty. So, too, is there plenty of fan interest in learning about his higher purpose.

The particulars of Butchie's purpose will depend on his placement, but he, like all his predecessors, will come free of charge. "It's an expensive proposition," Miller said. "Each dog that goes out costs well over $50,000, so working with teams like the Islanders that spread our message and communicate the needs of our organization, (like) volunteers and donations. It's amazing."

The Washington Capitals, Vegas Golden Knights and Utah Hockey Club have since launched their own partnerships, as have the NFL's Houston Texans and MLB's New York Mets, among others. And Miller says there are 12 to 15 more teams in the queue.



At Belmont Park, the Islanders have launched all five partnerships with a naming contest – before Butchie, there was Jethro, Monte, Tori and Radar – and have alternated between dogs designated for veterans and civilians. Each year, the Isles host the Guide Dog Foundation on a game night as part of their hockey with a heart program. The evening features promotions and culminates with the donation of 50/50 raffle proceeds, plus the reveal of the annual and much-beloved pucks and paws calendar.

The socialization process lasts just over a year for all of the foundation's puppies, whether they're reared in an arena, a family home or one of the 14 prisons with which the Guide Dog Foundation partners. At around 14 to 16 months, the dogs return to the foundation's HQ – located in Smithtown, Long Island – for three months of professional training with their "forever placement."

In the past, dogs have gone to former members of the armed services, injured first responders and even late former U.S. President George H. W. Bush.

Another, Radar, landed with Paralympic swimmer Anastasia Pagonis. At 16, Pagonis became the first recipient of an Islanders puppy. When Pagonis was 11, her vision began to rapidly deteriorate due to a rare immunological disease. Now 20, she's a Paralympic gold medallist and holds the world record in the 400-meter freestyle.

"I felt like a burden," she said. "Being a teenage girl in itself is hard. Having a disability on top of that, anything I ever wanted to do, I had to hold mommy's hand. But Radar helped me so much. As a person with a disability, you thrive to have any independence. Radar gave me that. Anything I want to do, I can do. I live."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEW YORK ISLANDERS

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THE COUNTDOWN

PLAYOFF GAMES PLAYED SINCE 2000

Which NHL teams have seen the most playoff action since the turn of the millennium? We count them down **BY JARED CLINTON**

IT HAS BEEN NEARLY 90 years since the Montreal Maroons played their final season in the NHL, and when the franchise shuttered in 1938, it took plenty of big-league lore with it.

For instance, did you know the Maroons were the last team to win the Stanley Cup by way of a series between the champions of the NHL and the Western League? It's true, and the Maroons would add another Cup to their trophy case when they swept the Toronto Maple Leafs in the 1935 final. The Maroons also featured the first two-time Hart Trophy winner, Nels Stewart, and were the team for whom Hall of Famers Hooley Smith, Lionel Conacher and Babe Siebert made their names.

So, perhaps it's no surprise the Maroons were one of the most dominant franchises before the economics of the day – the club fell victim to the Great Depression – resulted in their demise. That dominance shows in the league registers, too, as only the Maple Leafs and New York Rangers played more playoff games than the Maroons (46) during Montreal's 14-year NHL tenure.

Why is that relevant today? Because even now, the Maroons' success was such that if they were inserted into our countdown of the NHL's most playoff-tested franchises since the turn of the millennium, they wouldn't be at the bottom. Which clubs would the Maroons eclipse? The nascent Seattle Kraken are the easy answer – but they're not the only one.

1 PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

219 GAMES PLAYED

Four Stanley Cup finals, three titles and two more East finals in the Sidney Crosby era. Greatness personified.

2 TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

213 GAMES PLAYED

In 10 appearances, the Bolts' Jon Cooper has overseen more post-season games than all but 13 coaches in NHL history.

3 BOSTON BRUINS

208 GAMES PLAYED

The playoffs have mostly brought heartbreak. See: 2019's Game 7 Cup-final loss and 2023's gutting first-round exit.

4 SAN JOSE SHARKS

204 GAMES PLAYED

The Sharks circled but never feasted in the post-season. San Jose struggled to shake the aughts' choke-artist tag.

5 COLORADO AVALANCHE

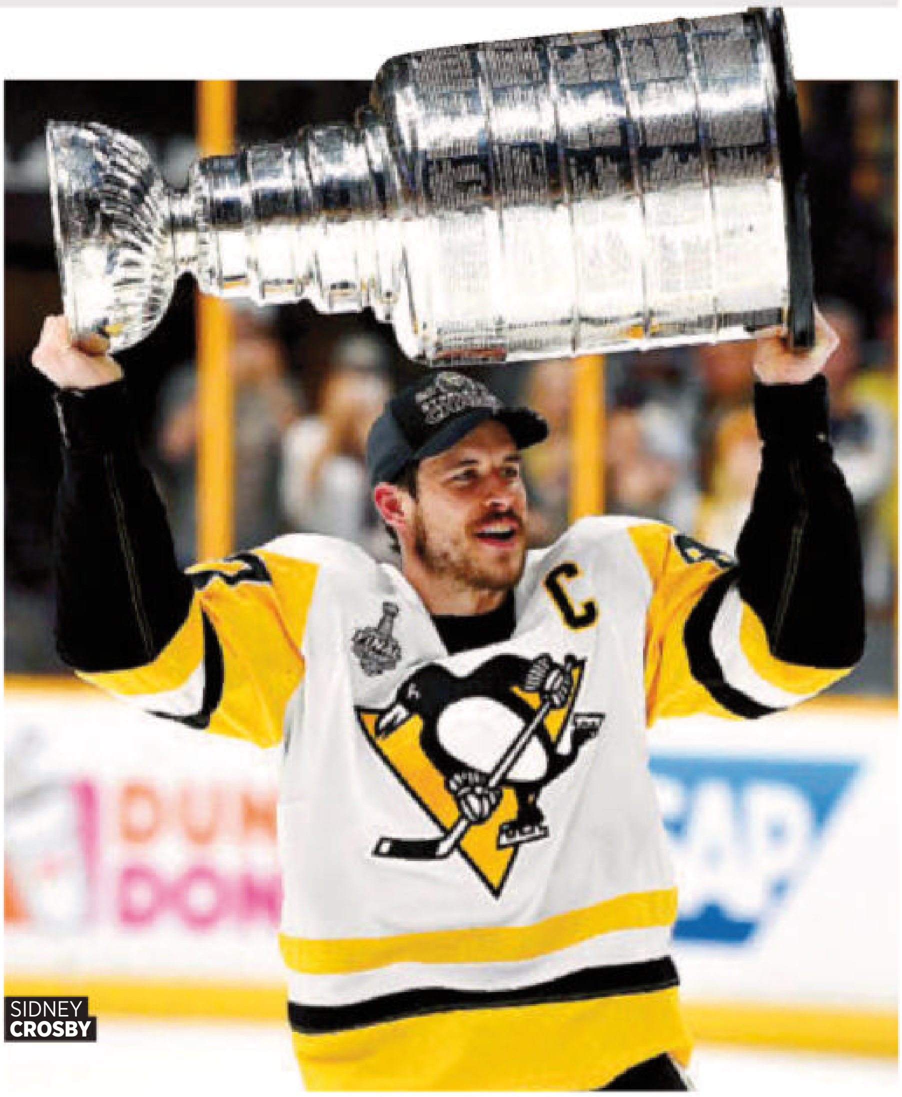
192 GAMES PLAYED

Past 25 years defined by a fallow period bookended by brilliance. Nathan MacKinnon is Avs' rightful heir to Joe Sakic.

6 DALLAS STARS

184 GAMES PLAYED

The Cup came before Y2K, but well-stocked Stars positioned to take next step after repeat conference final losses.



SIDNEY CROSBY

7 DETROIT RED WINGS

182 GAMES PLAYED

How steady were Wings in early 2000s? Enough to land seventh on this list despite no playoffs in past eight years.

8 NEW YORK RANGERS

175 GAMES PLAYED

Since 2000, no team has played more playoff games but fewer in the Stanley Cup final (five) than the Rangers.

9 PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

169 GAMES PLAYED

Eight coaches have won a playoff game in Philly since 2000 – but none has survived four full seasons with Flyers.

10 WASHINGTON CAPITALS

168 GAMES PLAYED

Caps have finished first in their division 10 times during Alex Ovechkin era, but 2018 was the lone Cup victory.

11 NEW JERSEY DEVILS

161 GAMES PLAYED

Devils won Cups in 2000 and 2003, but wayward for more than a decade with just one series win in past 12 years.

12 ST. LOUIS BLUES

157 GAMES PLAYED

Peaks and valleys throughout past 25 years but ascended NHL mountaintop with *Gloria*-powered 2019 Cup run.

CHRISTOPHER HANEWINCKEL-USA TODAY SPORTS

ALEX
OVECHKIN

13 ANAHEIM DUCKS

147 GAMES PLAYED

"Game 7" was an expletive in Anaheim as Ducks lost four straight Game 7s from 2013 to '16, three by two goals or fewer.

14 CAROLINA HURRICANES

146 GAMES PLAYED

Only four teams have won more playoff games since Rod Brind'Amour took over bench, but Cup has eluded his Canes.

15 MONTREAL CANADIENS

143 GAMES PLAYED

Habs fans, savor those post-season goals. Since 2000, Montreal has scored third-fewest goals per playoff game.

16 CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

142 GAMES PLAYED

Period of dominance sandwiched between deep morasses – and Hawks don't look primed for playoff return soon.

17 VANCOUVER CANUCKS

135 GAMES PLAYED

Steady rise to 2011 Cup final, but then not much: only five berths since, and no runs past second round.

18 NASHVILLE PREDATORS

131 GAMES PLAYED

Preds are most constant contender from 2000s expansion boom but have only advanced past first round five times.

19 OTTAWA SENATORS

129 GAMES PLAYED

Was 2017 the '*Sliding Doors*' moment? No playoff berths for Sens since losing in double OT of Game 7 of East final.

20 TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

127 GAMES PLAYED

Playoffs in eight straight seasons, but only one run past first round. Leafs haven't seen third round since 2002.

21 LOS ANGELES KINGS

127 GAMES PLAYED

After two Cups in three seasons, Kings have won just seven playoff games and zero playoff rounds in past 10 years.

22 EDMONTON OILERS

115 GAMES PLAYED

With Connor McDavid at the wheel – and now with reps in Cup final – Oilers will be dangerous for years to come.

23 NEW YORK ISLANDERS

106 GAMES PLAYED

Long gone are the halcyon days of the 1980s. Isles didn't win a single playoff round in the first 15 years of the 2000s.

24 MINNESOTA WILD

96 GAMES PLAYED

The Wild are regular playoff combatants but usually a quick out: Minnesota has averaged 7.4 games per berth.

25 VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

95 GAMES PLAYED

The yin to Wild's yang, as Vegas has averaged 15.8 games per playoff berth, the most of any team in the 2000s.

28 BUFFALO SABRES

65 GAMES PLAYED

Extra salt in the wound for Buffalo: only San Jose has a better post-2000 playoff win percentage without a Cup win.

29 WINNIPEG JETS

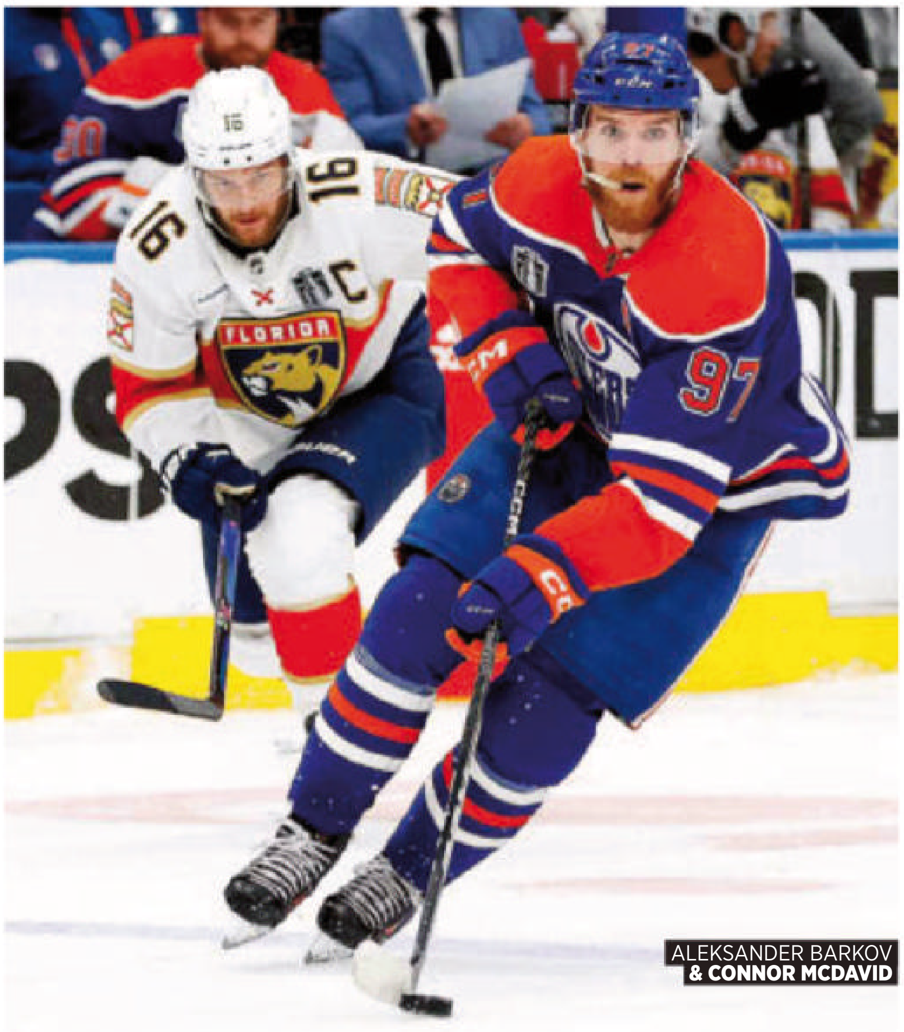
53 GAMES PLAYED

The franchise's first three and each of its past three playoff exits have been the result of four consecutive losses.

30 UTAH HOCKEY CLUB

46 GAMES PLAYED

Give Mike Smith credit for one-third of these games. His 2012 playoff performance dragged Coyotes to West final.



ALEKSANDER BARKOV
& CONNOR MCDAVID

26 CALGARY FLAMES

94 GAMES PLAYED

Total buoyed by 2004 Cup run. Flames have made it past first round just twice in the two decades that followed.

27 FLORIDA PANTHERS

82 GAMES PLAYED

Defending champs have made back-to-back finals and are set to remain among top contenders in the East.

31 COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

41 GAMES PLAYED

The Blue Jackets have won just a single seven-game series: their historic sweep of the Lightning in 2019.

32 SEATTLE KRAKEN

14 GAMES PLAYED

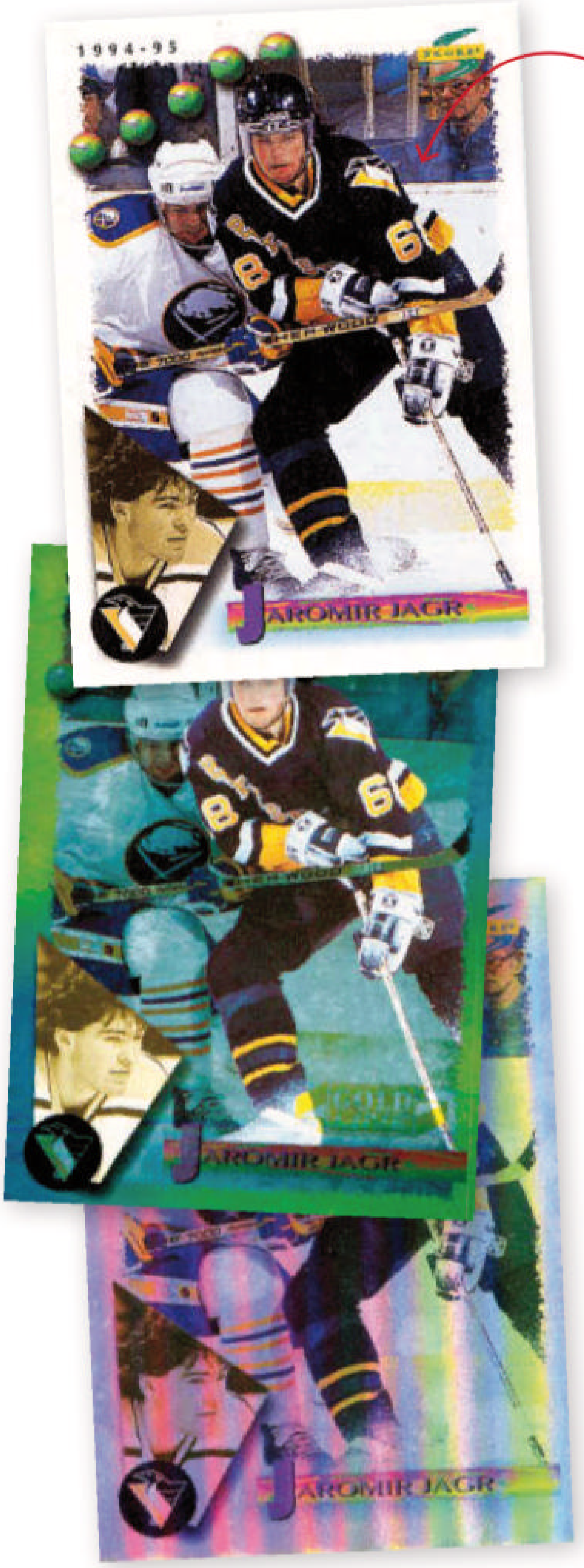
Seattle's only playoff had two Game 7s and plenty of goals: Kraken and foes combined for 6.35 goals per game. H

OVECHKIN: STEPHEN R. SYLVANIE-USA TODAY SPORTS; MCDAVID: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS

Puck CULTURE

FIVE WAYS THE 1994 LOCKOUT AFFECTED CARDS

This season marks the 30th anniversary of the '94 NHL lockout, which resulted in a 48-game campaign and had a lasting impact on the hockey-card industry **BY SAL BARRY**

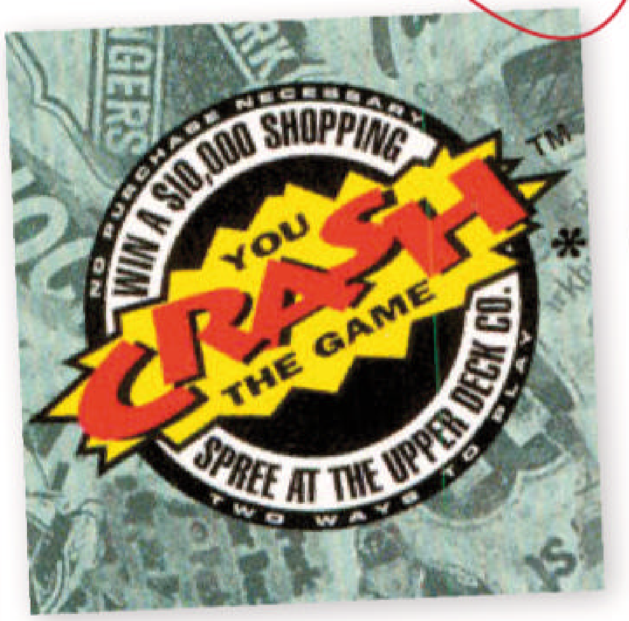


1 > FOOL'S GOLD

Card company Pinnacle Brands tried out a new promotion with its 1994-95 Score Series One hockey set, but it didn't go very well. Each pack of Score hockey cards included one special "Gold Line" parallel card. Collectors who put together a complete team set of Gold Line parallels could mail it in for a special "Platinum" version of the same team. The Gold Line cards would also be returned to the collector with a special Pinnacle-logo-shaped hole punched in them. Reportedly, each Platinum team set for the 26 NHL teams had a print run of 1,994. However, the lockout stifled the demand for hockey cards, so Score Series One didn't exactly fly off the shelves, and few Platinum Team Sets were redeemed.

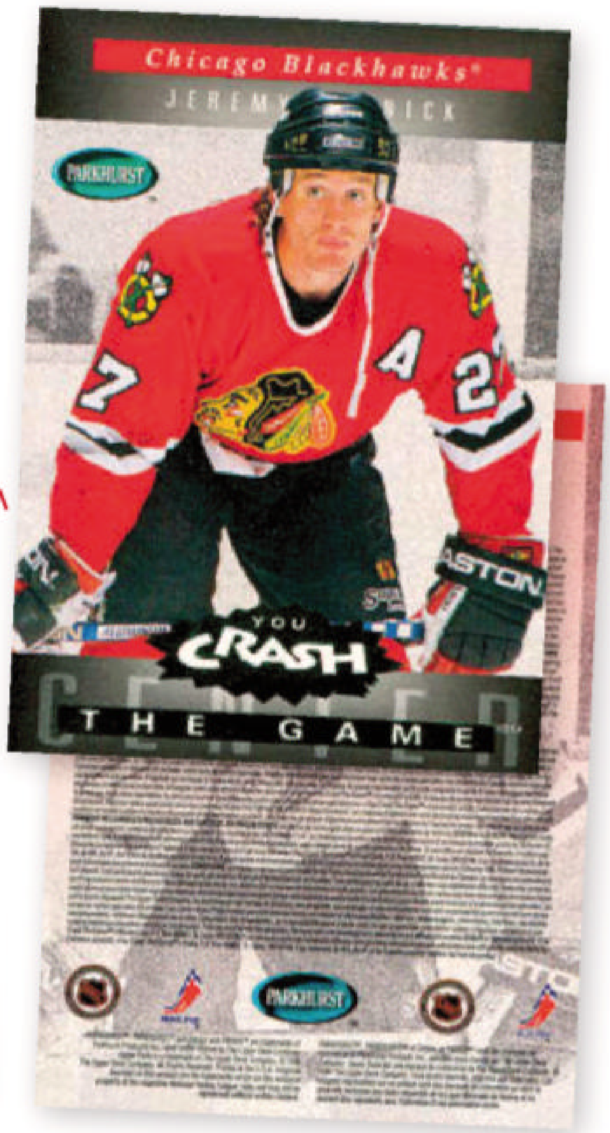
2 > CRASH AND BURN

When Upper Deck released its 1994-95 Parkhurst Series One set, one in every 23 packs included a game card for a contest called "You Crash the Game." A star NHLer was pictured on the front, with two upcoming games listed on the back. If the pictured player's team won either game, the card could be exchanged for a Silver "You Crash the Game" set, picturing the NHL's top players. If the player's team won both games, the card would net you a Gold "You Crash the Game" set. However, since the NHL schedule for 1994-95 was replaced with a new, shorter schedule, Upper Deck honored all game cards and gave a Gold Set for any game card that was mailed in. The Silver Sets were never produced.

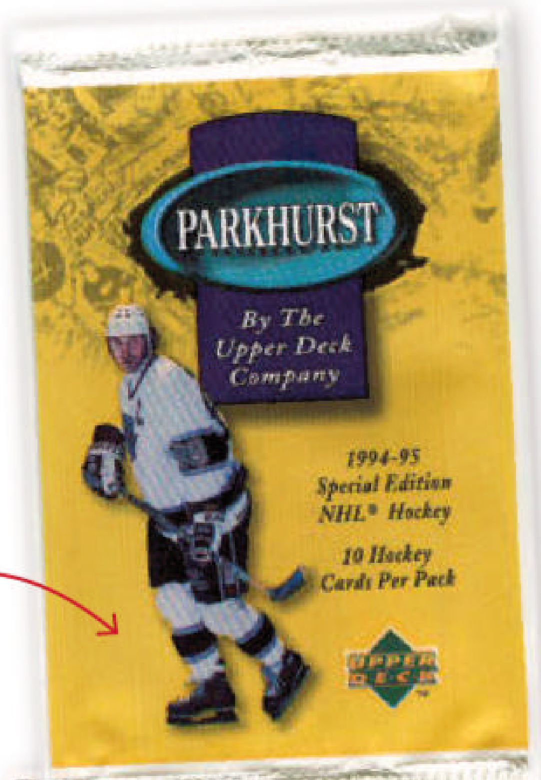


3 > MARIO IS MISSING

When a company issues a set of cards over two series, it usually refrains from putting every star player in the first series so that it can save some stars for the second series. But what if that second series never happens? The 1994-95 Topps Stadium Club Series One set omitted Mario Lemieux, Luc Robitaille and Jeremy Roenick, who were supposed to be in Stadium Club Series Two. Likewise, 1994-95 Score Series One excluded Wayne Gretzky, Patrick Roy and Martin Brodeur, who were held back for Score Series Two. Unfortunately, both those Series Two sets were cancelled due to poor sales, leaving both the 1994-95 Score and Stadium Club sets forever incomplete. Meanwhile, many stars did not have cards in Parkhurst Series One, because they were planned to be included in Series Two. But Upper Deck made a surprising move. The company rebranded Parkhurst Series Two as Parkhurst "Special Edition" and sold the product exclusively in Europe to make room for its new Upper Deck SP hockey set in North America.



PHOTOS BY SAL BARRY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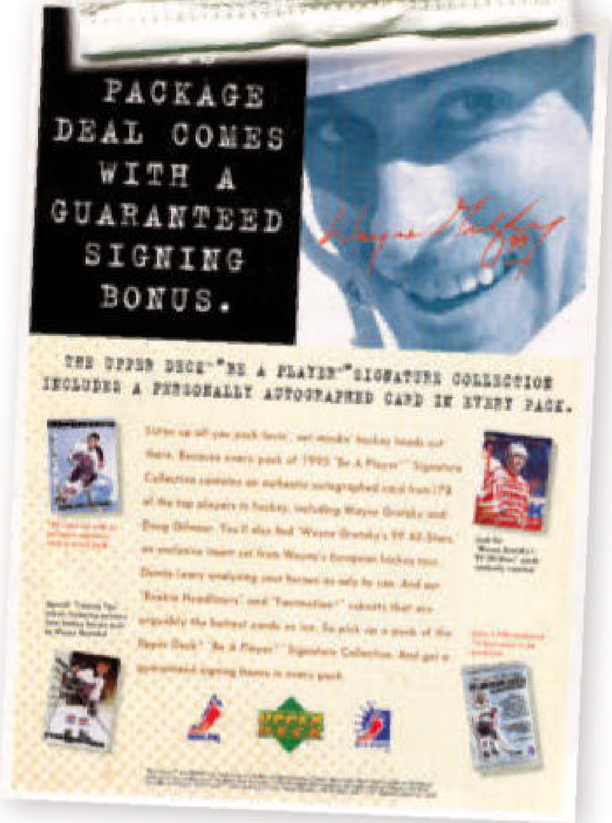
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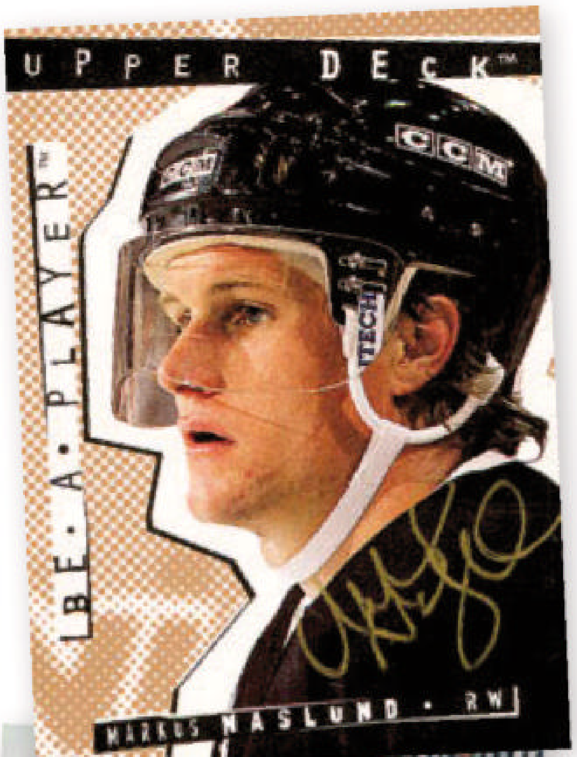
4 > INNOVATIVE INK

Before 1994-95, finding an autograph in a pack of hockey cards was rare. Maybe one in every 50 boxes. Maybe more. It's not known, because companies didn't disclose odds back then. That changed during the 1994 lockout. The NHLPA partnered with Upper Deck to create a set of cards called Be A Player. The set used photos of players in street clothes or generic uniforms, sans NHL logos. This cut out the need for licensing from the NHL, though the league would eventually license the set. The main draw for Be A Player was that each pack guaranteed an autographed card. Even though the packs had a then-hefty price tag of $5.95, Be A Player was successful and continued to offer one autograph per pack through 1998-99. Today, most sets have autographed cards, though usually at a rate of one per box.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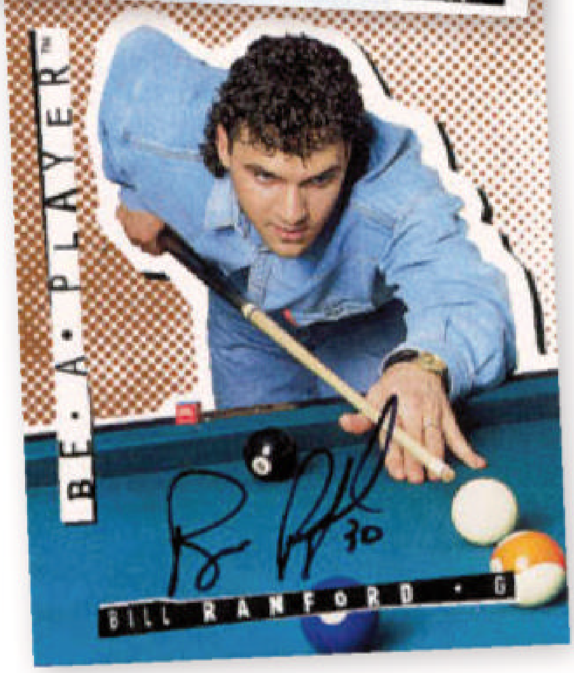
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5 > QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Up until the mid-1990s, hockey cards were still relatively inexpensive, costing around $1 per pack. Meanwhile, several sets of premium baseball cards were selling for upward of $5 per pack. Higher prices meant more revenue for everyone, so once the lockout ended, companies started producing premium hockey cards that really pushed the envelope. Topps issued a high-quality set called Finest, which boasted an all-metallic design. Leaf and Pinnacle Brands made premium sets called Limited and Select, respectively, with relatively low print runs. Fleer released a high-end set called Flair, which featured multiple photos printed on thick card stock. Upper Deck launched SP, which used a healthy dose of gold foil and included die-cut parallels. These innovations – used to boost lagging sales 30 years ago – were received well by collectors and are now the norm. H

JOSEPH
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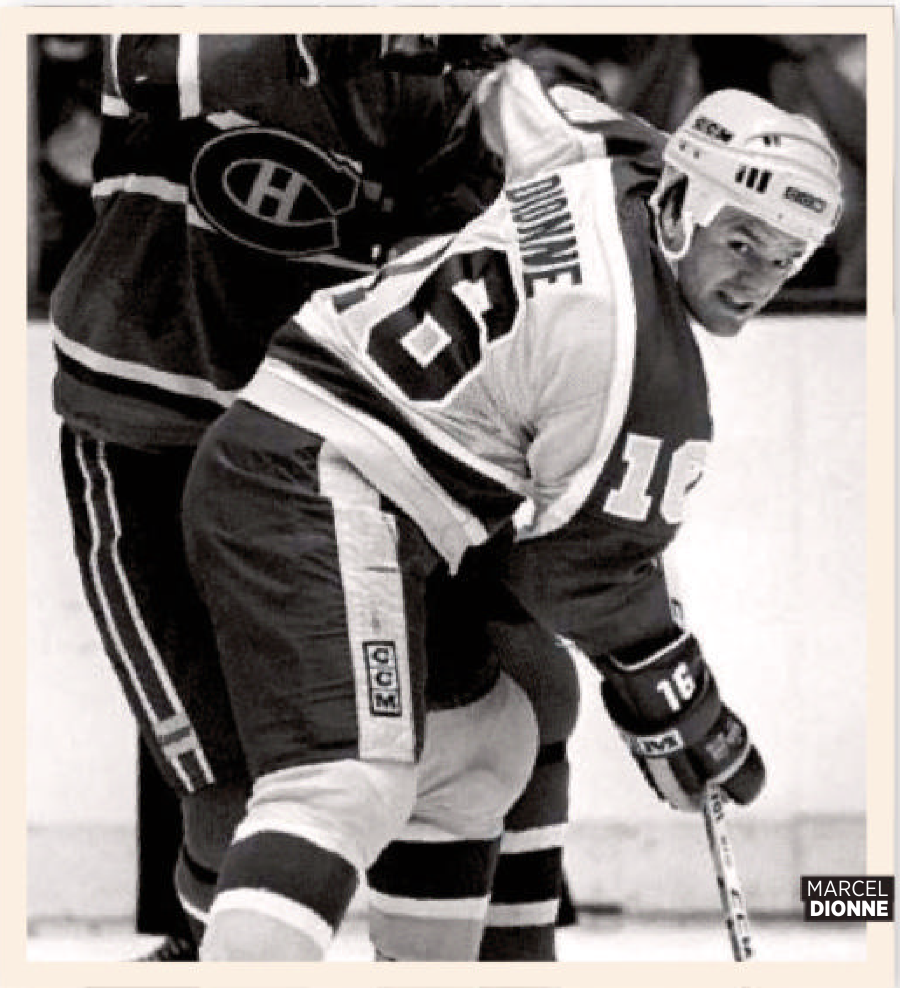

MARCEL
DIONNE

NHL

THE ALL-TIME NO-FINAL TEAM

An impressive lineup can be made from NHLers who never played a game in the Stanley Cup final **BY STUART MILLER-DAVIS**

THERE ARE PLENTY OF lists of the best players to never win a Stanley Cup, but many of those players – such as Joe Thornton, Jarome Iginla, Henrik Lundqvist and Roberto Luongo – had their hopes of a Cup ring dashed in the final.

For this roster, we're looking at players who suffered even more heartbreak. Lose in a conference final or two? Welcome to the all-time no-Cup-final team. Never even make it that far? We might have a spot for you, too.

First, some guidelines. This lineup is composed of a center, left winger, right winger, two defensemen and a goalie. It adheres strictly to positions as listed on NHL.com. So there are no centers shifted to the wing here. Also, we're only considering retired players. There's no Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, Mark Scheifele or any of the other current stars still chasing their first taste of the Stanley Cup final.

Forwards and defensemen were selected based on career points. The goalie was chosen based on career wins.

›CENTER

The pivot position goes to the No. 47 player on THN's Top 75 Players of All-Time from 2021, Marcel Dionne. He's third behind Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux for the most 100-point seasons in league history (eight), and his 1,771 points in 1,348 games rank him sixth all-time. But 49 postseason games split between the Los Angeles Kings and a last run with the New York Rangers at 35 proved to be fruitless. The furthest that Dionne ever advanced in the playoffs was the second round.

Runner-up: Mats Sundin, 1,349 points in 1,346 games.

MIKE
GARTNER

›RIGHT WING

Hall of Fame speedster Mike Gartner had 1,335 points in his 1,432-game career and another 93 in the playoffs split between the Washington Capitals, New York Rangers, Minnesota North Stars, Toronto Maple Leafs and Phoenix Coyotes. His closest call came in 1994, when his Leafs lost in the conference final after acquiring him from the eventual Cup-champion Rangers.

Runner-up: Shane Doan, 972 points in 1,540 games.

›LEFT WING

Keith Tkachuk racked up 1,065 points across 1,201 games, good for ninth all-time among left wingers and two second-team all-star nods. The two-time 50-goal scorer played 89 playoff games spread between three franchises and reached one conference final – with St. Louis in 2000-01.

Runner-up: Markus Naslund, 869 points in 1,117 games.

›DEFENSE

Gary Suter scored 844 points in 1,145 games and is – technically – a Stanley Cup champion. But he never played a game in the Cup final. Suter was injured for both the 1986 final (which Calgary lost to Montreal) and the 1989 final (which Calgary won over Montreal). The closest Suter got after that was a conference final in 1994-95 with the Blackhawks.

Doug Wilson had 827 points in 1,024 games with Chicago and the San Jose Sharks. The Hall of Fame defender and 1981-82 Norris Trophy winner made the conference final five times as a member of the Blackhawks. Despite a loss to the Vancouver Canucks in a five-game West final in 1981-82, he tied for the playoff lead in shots on goal. Three of his Hawks teams' next four trips to the conference final were losses to the dynastic Oilers.

Runners-up: Borje Salming, 787 points in 1,148 games; Kevin Hatcher, 677 points in 1,157 games.

CURTIS
JOSEPH

›GOALIE

Curtis Joseph has the seventh-most wins all-time, with 454 in 943 games. He made two trips to the conference final with Toronto, in 1999 and again in 2002. He made the playoffs in 14 of his 19 NHL seasons and played 133 postseason games, good for seventh all-time, but those forays with the Leafs were the closest that 'CuJo' ever got to the Cup.

Runner-up: Ryan Miller, 391 wins in 796 games.

DIONNE: JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA-IMAGN IMAGES; GARTNER: ANNE RYAN - USA TODAY SPORTS; JOSEPH: TOM SZCZERBOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

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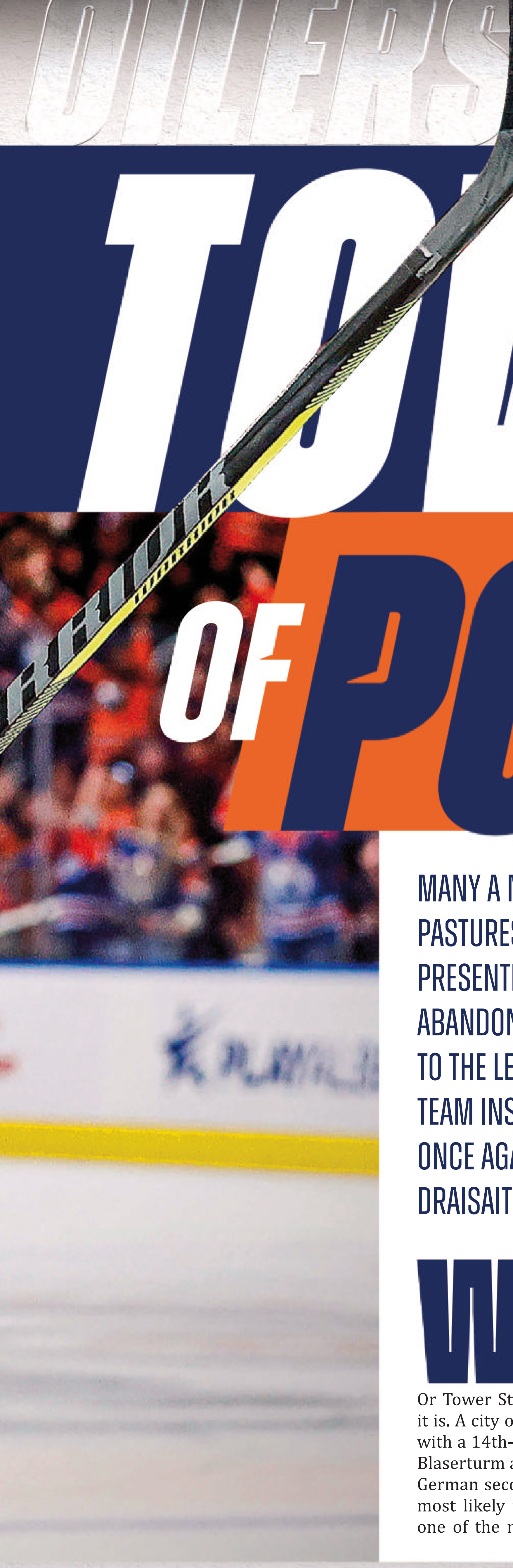
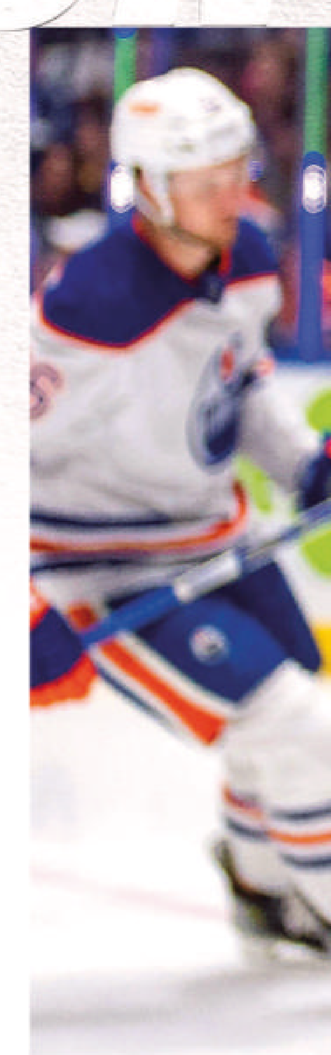


TOWER OF POWER

MANY A MODERN NHL PLAYER WOULD'VE BOLTED FOR SUNNIER PASTURES AND FRIENDLIER TAX REGIMES WHEN FREE AGENCY PRESENTED ITSELF. BUT **LEON DRAISAITL** WASN'T ABOUT TO ABANDON HIS MISSION IN EDMONTON. HE'S A THROWBACK TO THE LEGENDS WHO STAYED THE COURSE WITH THEIR DRAFT TEAM INSTEAD OF JUMPING SHIP TO CHASE THE STANLEY CUP. ONCE AGAIN, THE OILERS WILL EITHER SINK OR SWIM WITH DRAISAITL AND MCDAVID AT THE HELM **BY KEN CAMPBELL**

WHEN THEY INSIST ON referring to you as "the city of towers and gates," you may as well lean into it and call your team the Ravensburg Towerstars. Or Tower Stars, depending on what day it is. A city of 50,000 in the German Alps with a 14th-century tower known as the Blaserturm and a pro hockey team in the German second division isn't exactly the most likely venue for the incubation of one of the most explosive and dynamic players on the planet. Because, let's face it, it's no Leduc.

Nonetheless, Ravensburg is where Leon Draisaitl found himself during the most formative development period of his hockey life. His father, Peter, was coaching the Towerstars, and Leon was entering his teenage years. Scoring 192 points in 29 games – that's an average of 6.6 points per game for those of you reaching for your device – against German kids in Mannheim clearly wasn't enough of a hockey challenge for him, so he'd spend



all his free time at the Eissporthalle Ravensburg, where his dad worked. He'd be on the ice before and after practice (and sometimes during). He'd sit on the bench and follow drills and listen intently during power-play and penalty-killing sessions. But most of all, he'd try to get on the ice anytime he could with an undersized Canadian guy named Ben Thomson, who wore No. 29 for Ravensburg.

You know that ridiculous shot Draisaitl gets off from the right circle, the one that no goalie in the NHL seems capable of stopping these days? When Thomson isn't dining out on the fact that Draisaitl worshipped him so much that he took his number, Thomson will tell you that he spent hours feeding a young Draisaitl passes in just that sweet spot. He's a righty, and Draisaitl is a lefty, but Thomson claims the kid was mimicking him. Thomson is now a rancher in southern Alberta, thereby living out every kid's fantasy of being both a hockey player and a cowboy. But back in the day, he was a star at the University of Alberta. In the 2005 University Cup, Thomson scored the tying goal with 23 seconds to go and the winner 5:27 into overtime to give the Golden Bears the 11th of their 16 Canadian university titles. At 5-foot-7 and 181 pounds, Thomson might have found a pro hockey job closer to home in this day and age, but in those days, the German second division was where he ended up before he retired to become a cowboy.

> “HE SKATED LIKE ONE OF THE HANSONS WHEN HE WAS A KID. **IT WAS LIKE HE WAS PITCHING HAY ALL THE TIME** – Ben Thomson

Taught the kid everything he knows, Thomson claims. Even badgered him constantly to improve his skating beyond that of *Slap Shot* ilk. “He skated like one of the Hansons when he was a kid,” Thomson said. “It was like he was pitching hay all the time. We always bugged him about that, so it's good to see that he's lengthened his arms a little bit.”

Draisaitl jokes that, “He's right, I kind of looked like one of the Hanson Brothers. I kind of still do.” But he's not about to start beating up Coke machines or putting on the foil or berating the referee because “I'm listening to the f---in' song!” The fact is, Draisaitl's skating

PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS

has improved markedly since he came into the league, and especially since he bought a summer place in Toronto and has followed his best friend, Connor McDavid, into former NHLer Gary Roberts' little cult, the one where they never order french fries or put mayonnaise on anything. In fact, it's one of many weapons Draisaitl has developed to become one of the world's best players. He skates better than a lot of people think, defends far more robustly than perceived and is not nearly as grumpy or grouchy as he would lead people to believe.

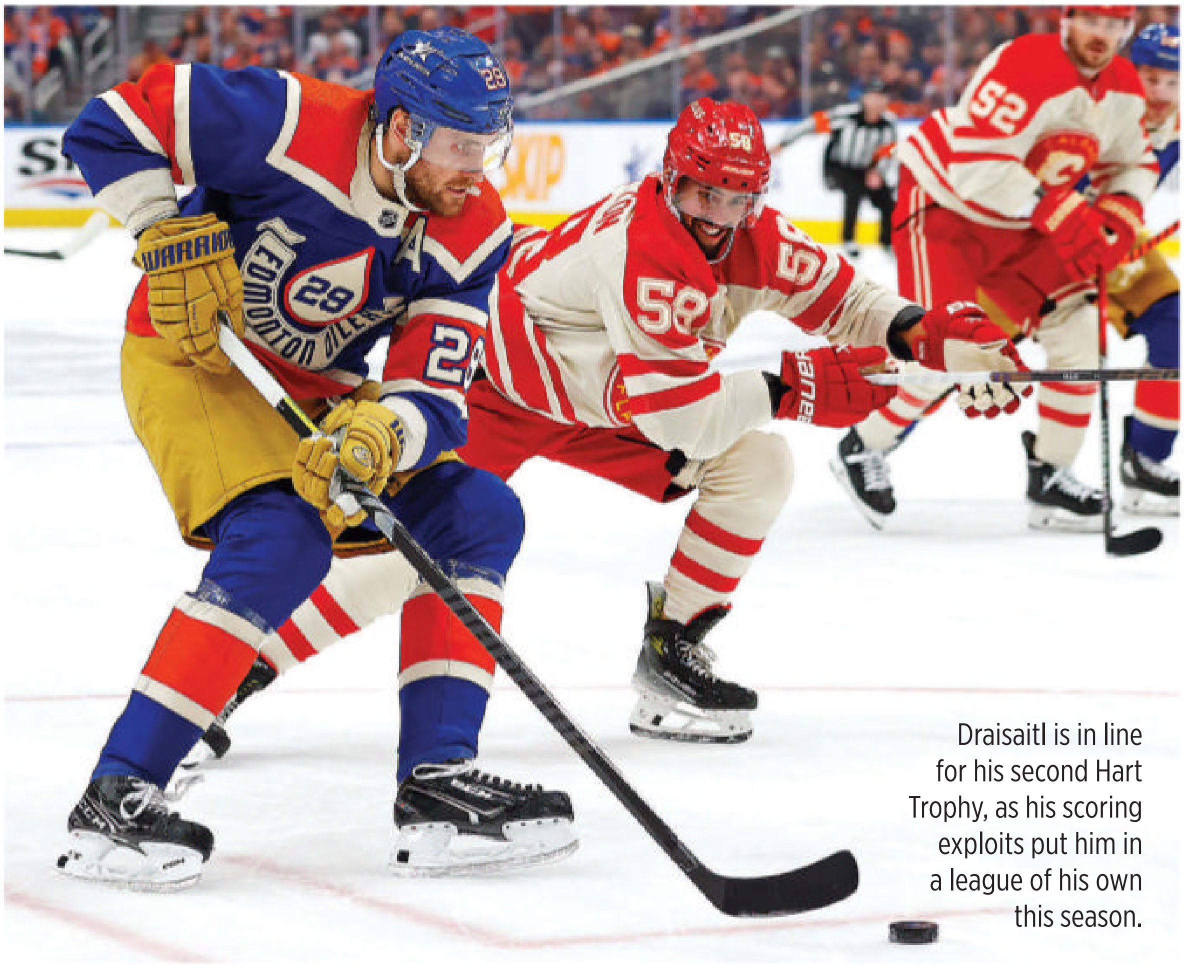
Wait, what's that? "Oh no, he's a grump," said Draisaitl's agent Andy Scott. "He's a bona fide grump."

After a second to reflect, Scott walks it back a little. It's not as though Draisaitl wakes up daily in ill humor. Quite the opposite, actually. He's a gentleman, gracious with his time, and, get this, former Oilers GM Ken Holland – who has worked with the likes of Nicklas Lidstrom, Steve Yzerman, Brendan Shanahan and Chris Chelios – describes Draisaitl as "one of my favorite players I've ever managed." And, really, why would Draisaitl be angry? He's wildly talented, he'll be the clubhouse leader in cap hit when his eight-year contract extension with the Oilers kicks in next season, and he's getting married this summer in the south of France to his best friend's wife's best friend. Life is good.

He's not dour. He is, however, as straightforward as they come, doesn't suffer fools and tends to be direct and economical with words when he speaks. It's no coincidence that he and McDavid get along so well, since they both make Jonathan Toews look more like Captain Kangaroo than Captain Serious. "I don't put on a show," Draisaitl said. "That's just the way I am. Some days I'm a little grumpier than others. It's just my personality. But I've got a big heart on the inside. And if you don't know that, then you don't know me. And that's OK."

Are there times when Draisaitl's body language, or actual language, on the bench is a little pointed and curmudgeonly? Of course, but that's the way it is with the truly great ones. When they're in the moment, they sometimes forget that it's impossible for others to live up to the standards they set for themselves. Yzerman wasn't always a barrel of monkeys himself,

> “SOME DAYS I'M A LITTLE GRUMPIER THAN OTHERS. **IT'S JUST MY PERSONALITY. BUT I'VE GOT A BIG HEART** – Leon Draisaitl



Draisaitl is in line for his second Hart Trophy, as his scoring exploits put him in a league of his own this season.

BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS; PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS

LEON DRAISAITL

EVAN BOUCHARD, CONNOR MCDAVID,
LEON DRAISAITL & ZACH HYMAN

and Nathan MacKinnon, well, he can be a little prickly, just like Draisaitl. “Sometimes you see him getting frustrated on the bench, but he’s got an incredibly big heart,” said Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch. “He gets mad about something, and then he feels bad about it.”

According to his coach, Draisaitl is the first to the rink almost every day. He meticulously tapes and works on his stick – the one with the blade so wide you can almost see it from outer space – in an effort to do the little things that maximize performance. And it all goes back to his childhood days at the Eissporthalle Ravensburg, when he would spend time in the dressing room before his father’s team practised, then spend almost all of the session in the runway with a tennis ball and his stick, keeping the ball in the air for as many consecutive hits as possible. “There was never a time where I didn’t see him with a hockey stick doing tricks with pucks and tennis balls,” Thomson said. “He loved the game and loved being around it. He ate absolutely everything up, from what we said to how we acted to how we prepared, how we trained. He was just a sponge when it came to the game.”

> “HE SAID SOMETHING THAT REALLY HIT HOME. **‘ALL THE GREATS, ALL THE LEGENDS, WON WHERE THEY WERE DRAFTED’** – Andy Scott, Draisaitl’s agent

A decade-and-a-half later, Draisaitl continues to be a sponge, soaking up goals and offense at a prodigious pace this season. It’s actually a little ridiculous how much better he has been than everyone else in the NHL in 2024-25. Through his first 67 games this season, Draisaitl had been held scoreless in only 10 of them – five of the first 14 and five of the next 53. He had an 18-game streak, with points in 26 of his previous 27. He was making a mockery of the Rocket Richard Trophy race, and when you took away empty-net goals, Draisaitl was without peer offensively. (Through mid-March, Draisaitl had just four empty-net points. MacKinnon, who was two points ahead of him in the scoring race at the time, had 13.)

“He has been outstanding all year,” Knoblauch said. “He’s been strong. Dominant almost every single night. He has been one of the best, if not the best forward on the ice each night. For him to play as well as he has so consistently is pretty remarkable.”

But it isn’t simply the consistency with which Draisaitl was scoring that is so uncanny. It’s as much about the quality of offense as it is the quantity that sets him apart this season. When McDavid missed six games earlier in the season with injury and suspension, all Draisaitl did was score five goals and 11 points. Through mid-March, Draisaitl led the league with 12 first goals of the game and 24 points on first goals. (McDavid was second at 4-13-17.) In goals that put the Oilers ahead at any point in a game, Draisaitl had 22-21-43 totals, far ahead of McDavid at 8-27-35. And Draisaitl had 10 goals and 24 points on goals that put the Oilers ahead in a game for good, again ahead of McDavid at 3-16-19. The only situation where McDavid (5-15-20) had more points than Draisaitl (8-10-18) was on goals that tied a game.

Remarkable indeed. Combine that with some of the best faceoff numbers in the NHL and a robust 200-foot game and you have the makings of a Hart Trophy winner. Which is great for Draisaitl, who has already won the award once and probably likes the idea of swapping out McDavid’s name for his own on the trophy’s nameplate every once in a while. But as the Oilers prepared for the playoffs and hit some pretty significant bumps down the stretch, it highlighted what has long been a flaw in Edmonton’s roster, and that is the Oilers, despite all their efforts to change the narrative, are relying on Draisaitl and McDavid to drag them into the fight as much as they ever have. In mid-March when the Oilers defeated the New York Islanders 2-1 in overtime, Draisaitl scored both goals to extend his point streak to 17, and the overtime-winner was his 100th point of the season on the Oilers’ total of 211 goals. At one point in the season, Draisaitl had 25 more goals than McDavid, while the next-highest difference between the No. 1 and No. 2 scorers after that was 12. Seventy of those points had come at even

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

strength, despite the fact that he had played much of the season on the Oilers' second line with Vasily Podkolzin and Viktor Arvidsson on his flanks. Sure, the 14 goals between the two of them were appreciated, but there didn't seem to be a game this season where Draisaitl didn't have a good number of teammates clutching onto his superhero's cape. And it's not as though this is anything new. Since 2018-19, when Draisaitl posted the first of seven consecutive 100-point seasons or the equivalent (he had 84 in the truncated 56-game season in 2020-21) nobody has scored more goals than Draisaitl, and only McDavid has more points.

It's much of the reason Draisaitl's contract extension, which will pay him an average of $14 million in each of the next eight seasons, might look like one of the league's most team-friendly deals in the early years. When Scott sat with colleague Mike Liut around Draisaitl's kitchen table last summer to explore their options when Draisaitl was set to become an unrestricted free agent after this season, they talked about weather and no-tax U.S. states and places where Draisaitl would have the best chance to win the Stanley Cup. There's a 55-degree Fahrenheit difference between the average temperature in Miami and Edmonton in January, which might mean something to somebody who has played all but 38 games in the prior 13 years in two places – Edmonton and Prince Albert, Sask. And he'd have taken home $1.8 million more on the $16.5 million he's due to make next season if he were in Dallas instead of Edmonton. But Scott said Draisaitl made it clear where he wants to be.

"He's like, 'I'm a hockey player. I want to play hockey,' " Scott said. " 'This is a great team, and this is a great market.' This is a true hockey player. He's not like, 'Yeah, I wouldn't mind getting closer to the beach or not having state tax. I can do all that stuff at the end of my career. I've got lots of time to do that stuff. I want to win in a hockey market with a good group of people around me.' And then he said something that really hit home. He said, " 'All the greats, all the legends, won where they were drafted.' "

PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

FINAL PUSH

The NHL's leading goal-scorer's biggest goal? To win the Cup – in Edmonton.

There are no guarantees that will happen, this season or any other. In fact, there are those who believe the Oilers are further away from winning the Stanley Cup in 2025 than when they came excruciatingly close in 2024. McDavid's contract is up after next season, and his future there is still uncertain. Perhaps he'll have a conversation around his dinner table this summer with his agent, Judd Moldaver, and come to the same conclusion his best buddy did. Maybe not. Sometimes, best friends and their best-friend wives drift apart.

And you have to wonder how long the Oilers can continue to rely so heavily on so few players. Last year in the playoffs, Draisaitl broke a rib in Game 1 of the second round when he was hit by Vancouver Canucks defenseman Tyler Myers, and he played through that and a hand injury for the rest of the post-season. Three years ago, Draisaitl sustained a high-ankle sprain in the first round and gutted it out for two more rounds as the Oilers made it to the Western Conference final. In the Oilers' past three playoff runs, Draisaitl has 81 points in 53 games, second only to McDavid's 95.

"I mean, that's the reason why I committed – why I'm here long-term," Draisaitl said. "Winning a Stanley Cup is the ultimate goal. Winning the Stanley Cup anywhere is special. I'm aware of that, but I think the path we've been on and what we've been through, to win it here would mean just so much more to me. That's the goal. We're chasing it. We were close last year, and, hopefully, sooner than later, we win it."

The only guy Draisaitl may have idolized more than Ben Thomson was Pavel Datsyuk. That's why Draisaitl, to this day, uses a stick with a wide blade, and why he's so good on the backhand. He's already following Datsyuk to the Hall of Fame, that much is for sure. Draisaitl has already blown past his idol when it comes to points, but Datsyuk won two Stanley Cups, one as a good-but-not-great rookie and another as the best two-way player on the planet. Last June, Datsyuk was visiting his former agent, Dan Milstein, who has a place in Florida. He was having lunch with Holland at the Oilers' hotel the morning before Game 7, and Holland texted Draisaitl to invite him to join them. Draisaitl was reminded then that all he can hope for is to keep the Oilers among the teams contending for the Cup, to keep banging on the door until one day they break through. Nearly nine months later, he's reminded of the same thing after a morning skate in Buffalo, down the stretch of a season in which he has been dominant in every way.

"I hope you're right," he said.

WHAT A LONG STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN

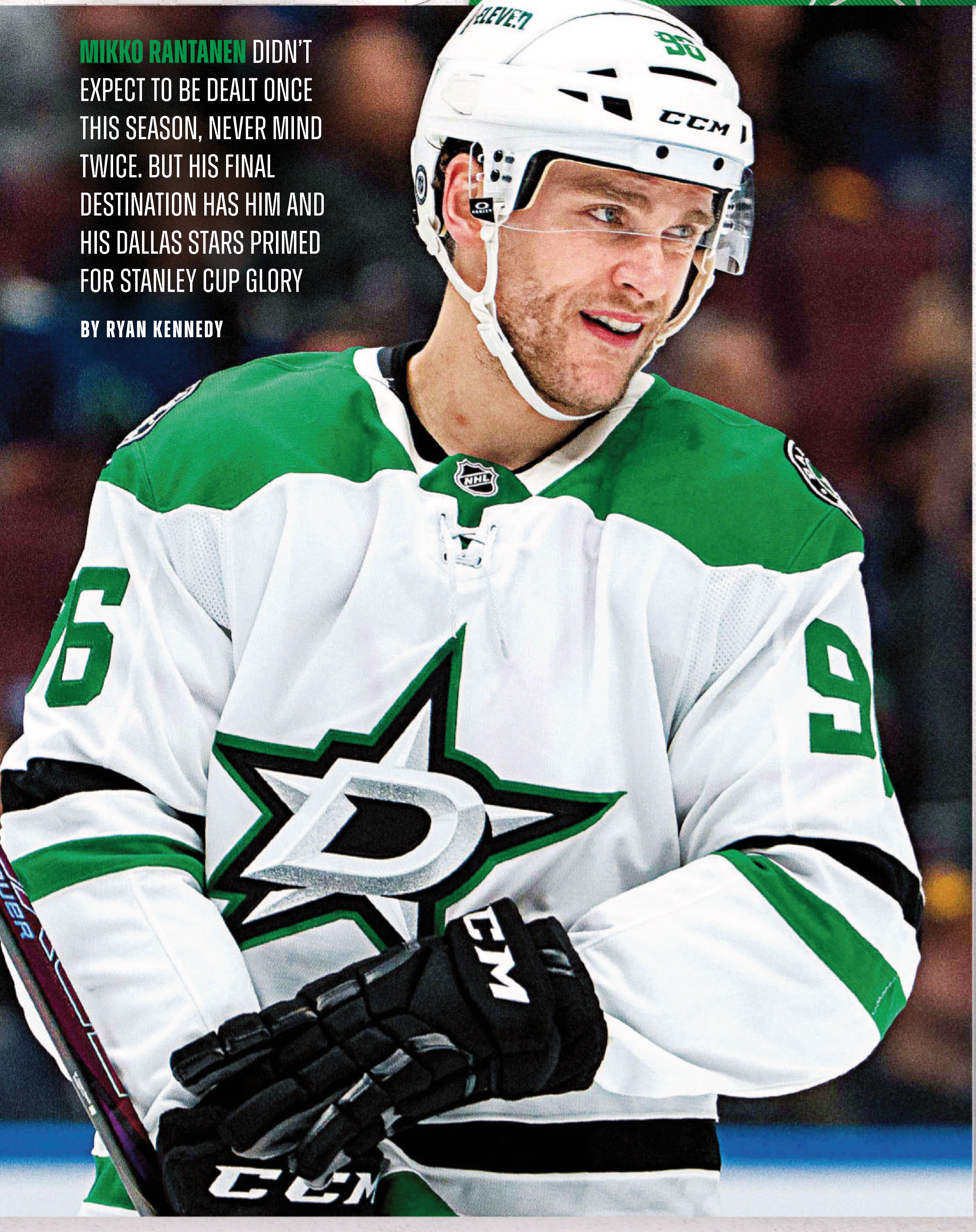
WHEN THE CAROLINA Hurricanes acquired Mikko Rantanen on Jan. 24 from the Colorado Avalanche, a shockwave coursed through the entire hockey world.

The blockbuster deal, which sent Martin Necas and Jack Drury to Denver, instantly gave Carolina something the franchise had lacked since Eric Staal in 2005-06: a top-10 NHL scoring talent. And practically no one saw it coming. "I was like, 'Wow, really?' " said Canes center Sebastian Aho. "I tried to call him, and I'm sure he had 150 missed calls. But later that night, he called me and said it was true. He's going to help us big-time moving forward. A trade like that doesn't happen very often, so it was kind of a shock."

The deal sent a message that Carolina and its new GM, Eric

RIGHT: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES; LEFT: JEROME MIRON-IMAGN IMAGES

STARS



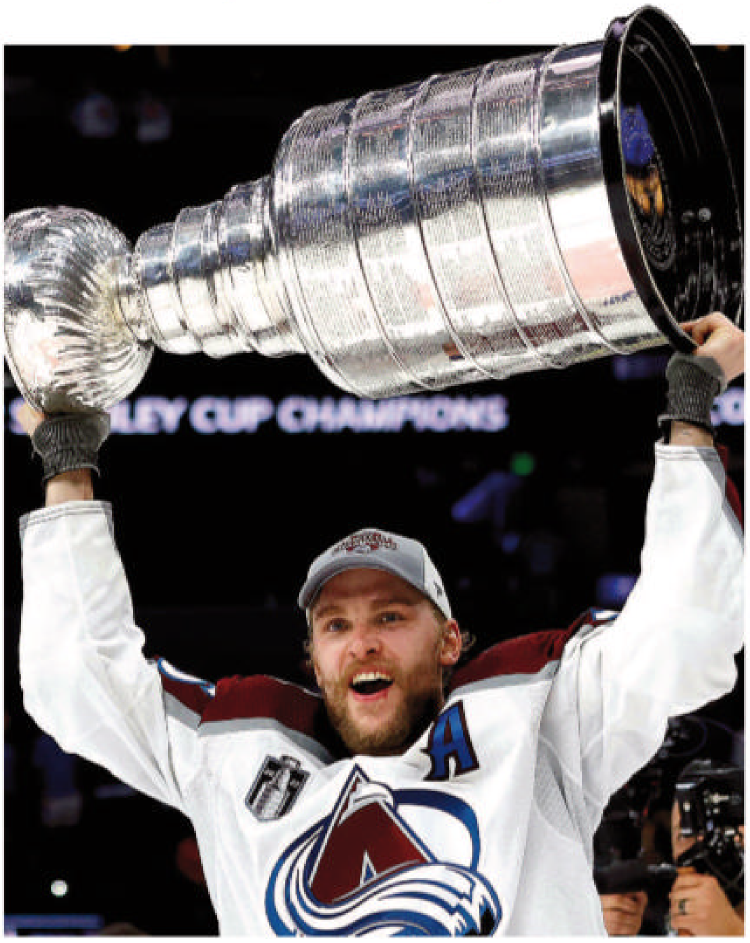
MIKKO RANTANEN DIDN'T EXPECT TO BE DEALT ONCE THIS SEASON, NEVER MIND TWICE. BUT HIS FINAL DESTINATION HAS HIM AND HIS DALLAS STARS PRIMED FOR STANLEY CUP GLORY

BY RYAN KENNEDY

HELLO, GOODBYE
Rantanen's tenure in Carolina with Aho lasted just 13 games.

Tulsky, were dead-set on winning a championship. The Canes have been one of the better regular-season teams of late, but they do not have a signature playoff run under celebrated coach Rod Brind'Amour. They never seemed to have that guy who could get you a goal when it was most needed, and in Rantanen, they now had a player who notched 55 tallies just a couple of years ago – plus he has a Stanley Cup on his resume. “It's a huge signal to us that they want to win and do it now,” said Canes defenseman Jaccob Slavin. “As a group, it instills confidence, and now, it's a matter of doing it. We've been there the past five or six years and haven't been able to get over that edge, so hopefully this is the year we do it.”

About that...



This is where we insert the “record scratch” noise, because as we all know, Rantanen is no longer a member of the Hurricanes. His tenure in Carolina lasted just 13 underwhelming games before Tulsky once again jolted the hockey world by dealing the star right winger to Dallas at the trade deadline. This time, Rantanen was exchanged for rookie center Logan Stankoven and a bevy of draft picks, including two first-rounders. Not only was the deal a blow to Carolina's Cup chances, but Tulsky revealed that the amount of time it took to consummate the trade with Dallas – which featured the added challenge of Rantanen signing a contract extension with the Stars – hindered the GM in his quest for other players on deadline day.

As for Dallas, the Stars couldn't be happier to have such a potent weapon as they try for the franchise's second Cup title. “Any time you have an opportunity to acquire one of the top players in the game, it's something you have to look into,” said GM Jim Nill. “He's in the prime of his career. We think he's a great fit for us with his connection to the Finns on our team. We've watched him play against us for the past eight years, and everybody knows how accomplished he is.”

> “HE'S IN THE PRIME OF HIS CAREER. **WE THINK HE'S A GREAT FIT FOR US**
>
> – Stars GM Jim Nill

While Rantanen posted just six points in 13 games with Carolina, he fit in with Dallas immediately, tallying three points in his first two contests. His comfort level with the Stars players likely helped, and Nill pointed out that when Rantanen was in Colorado, he would always chat up his fellow Finns on Dallas after the game whenever the Stars came to town. Keep in mind, Dallas' Finnish contingent is strong, with Miro Heiskanen, Roope Hintz and Esa Lindell, as well as Mikael Granlund, who was added in February. Of course, Carolina had Aho and Jesperi Kotkaniemi, but it didn't seem to matter: in the wake of the Dallas trade, Brind'Amour revealed that Rantanen was up front upon his arrival that the Hurricanes were not a team he had on his wish list as a destination. This was evident at the 4 Nations Face-Off shortly after the trade, where his comments didn't scream enthusiasm. “The first reaction was shock, yeah,” Rantanen said. “But when you start playing games, getting into practices and feeling comfortable around the team and their routines...I'm not saying it's easy, but the time in games and practices helps.”

As Rantanen's agent, Andy Scott, pointed out in interviews after the Dallas trade, his client wasn't expecting to leave Colorado in the first place. Sure, he was a pending UFA after this season, but there was still plenty of time to negotiate. The Avs clearly felt differently, and, to their credit, getting a red-hot Necas as part of the return in the deal is looking great – especially after GM

TOP: JAMES GUILLORY-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: GEOFF BURKE-USA TODAY SPORTS

TOP: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

> “HE’S A POSITIVE, HARDWORKING **GUY WHO SHOWS UP TO THE RINK WITH A SMILE** – Sebastian Aho

Chris MacFarland loaded up at the deadline with centers Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle.

Ultimately, Rantanen agreed to an eight-year, $96-million extension with Dallas. “We have skill, we’re a high-skill team, but you’re adding even more,” Nill said. “He’s a big body. He works down low well. He works the corners. So we’ve added to our size. But, really, it’s the combination of who he is as a player. He’s an elite player and has been one of the leading scorers in the league the past four or five years. Playoff success is a big part of it. And he’s a high-end character player.”

START TO FINNISH

The Stars’ contingent of Finns has helped Rantanen settle in immediately.

Indeed, the Cup ring that Rantanen earned with Colorado in 2022 looms large for Dallas, as it doubles the number of champs on their roster (the injured Tyler Seguin being the other thanks to his early days in Boston). For Rantanen, going all the way can have a subtle effect. “As a player, it doesn’t change you much, but maybe it’s the experience,” he said. “You’ve seen what it takes to win it all. For sure, mentally, you have more experience, and obviously, that helps.”

What will be most intriguing for

MIKKO RANTANEN

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

the Stars is how much Rantanen can turbocharge their attack. Dallas already had one of the NHL's most potent offenses, though the power play had been mid-pack. For a guy who played with Nathan MacKinnon for most of his career, there would always be an adjustment, but the early returns with Wyatt Johnston and Jason Robertson were promising. But even vibing with 'Nate Dogg' was a process. "It was a lot of games together," Rantanen said. "And Cale Makar was there in 2019, so we all had six years together, and with Nate, it was even longer, nine years. Sometimes, it's instant, but it usually takes time to find it."

During his time in Colorado, Rantanen became a star – some might even say a borderline superstar. The 10th overall pick in 2015 came to North America right away, breaking rookie records with AHL San Antonio for goals, assists and points. In the middle of the season, he returned to Finland, where the nation was hosting the World Junior Championship in Helsinki. He and Aho were teammates on a Suomi squad that won gold in front of a bonkers home crowd, and while their time as teammates in Carolina didn't last long, Rantanen hasn't changed much over the years. "As a guy, he's the same," Aho said. "He's always been a positive, hardworking guy who shows up to the rink with a smile. He's an easy guy to hang out with."

By his sophomore season with Colorado, Rantanen was already a point-per-game player. The past two seasons, he broke 100 points with the Avs, and he was on pace for 93 points this season. At 28, he's still in his prime, adding to a Dallas roster that is constructed for immediate and future success. The Stars come at you in waves, but the lineup also flows nicely. Veterans such as Seguin, captain Jamie Benn and Matt Duchene are all in their 30s, while Robertson, Heiskanen, Hintz and goalie Jake Oettinger are among the difference-makers in their primes. Coming up behind that cohort are rising stars such as Johnston, defenseman Thomas Harley and center Mavrik Bourque. "We have a good mix, and they seem to really get along well," Nill said. "They make each other accountable, which is important."

And now we wait to see the result. In a twist that only the hockey gods could pull off, there's a good chance the Stars will face the Avs in the first round of the playoffs – a Mikko Rantanen Bowl, if you will. The top-heavy Western Conference will be brutal to get through, but the addition of a powerful, high-scoring winger to an already impressive lineup means that Dallas can enter the post-season knowing that the team has been set up to win now. All the boxes have been ticked, and the only thing left is to see if the Stars can clinch their first Cup since 1999. When their GM watches them play, he does so with confidence. "I sit up there, and I know we have a chance to win every night," Nill said. "It doesn't mean we're *going* to win every night, but I know we have a chance, and that's a pretty good feeling." H

TOP: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

OVI'S LINEMATES

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

"DON'T SCREW THIS UP"

IT'S NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKS PLAYING WITH THE MAN SET TO BREAK THE NHL'S ALL-TIME GOAL RECORD. BUT AS MUCH PRESSURE AS COMES WITH BEING **ALEX OVECHKIN'S LINEMATE**, THE REWARDS CAN BE JUST AS SWEET

BY SAMMI SILBER

MIKE KNUBLE KNEW WHEN he signed his two-year contract to join the Washington Capitals in July 2009 that he was there for one primary reason: to play opposite Alex Ovechkin, the young-gun Russian superstar who – while not in the same conversation as Wayne Gretzky at the time – was in his prime and piling up goals.

Knowing his role was one thing, but it was entirely another to actually line up on the ice alongside Ovechkin. And in that first game, Knuble, who was 37 at the time and made a career out of complementing guys and making a home for himself around the net, had one thought.

Don't screw this up.

"The biggest thing, OK, there was a couple things, but the No. 1 thing was, you don't want to slow him down," said Knuble with a laugh. For Knuble, it wasn't as simple as just taking on a key role; he was filling big skates. The last linemate Ovechkin had was countryman Viktor Kozlov, who, while not scoring as many goals himself, clicked well with No. 8 and helped Ovechkin to seasons of 65 goals in 2007-08 and 56 goals in 2008-09.

The pressure was on for the veteran Knuble going into a year where Washington was expected to make significant strides. "He's trending as a 100-point guy, and you're playing with him." Knuble said. "You're linked to him. You don't want his percentage to go down. If now he's down to 80 points, you're like, 'Who are they going to point the finger at?' "

But when the puck dropped, it was business as usual. Knuble felt the pressure melting away with each stride, as he and Ovechkin benefitted greatly from their time together on that deep 2009-10 Capitals squad. Over those first two seasons, playing primarily with each other, Ovechkin and Knuble combined for 135 goals and 287 points.

OVI'S LINEMATES

While there are obviously benefits to playing on a line with arguably the greatest goal-scorer ever – who, when this issue went to press, was eight goals away from breaking Wayne Gretzky's all-time NHL record of 894 – there's a lot more that goes into being Ovechkin's linemate.

HEY, NO PRESSURE

Knuble knew he'd draw ire if Ovechkin's totals suddenly went down with him.

But what, exactly, is that?

Well, first of all, you couldn't simply ride the opposite wing and hope the goals would just *happen* thanks to the star power on your left. Knuble had been around long enough to know that. It takes a lot of grit to play that role with Ovechkin. "You had to get him the puck when you could," Knuble said, "and do some of the legwork."

For the Toronto-born right winger, that meant winning board battles, finding the open man and then getting to the front of the net in case of a rebound or deflection chance.

At the same time, while the goal was obviously to get Ovechkin the puck as much as possible, that wasn't Knuble's sole purpose. Despite having made a living out of crashing the crease and getting to the dirty areas, Knuble had to take matters into his own hands when he could. When he had the puck, he'd have to make the right decision rather than automatically passing it to 'Ovi.' "As a player, you had to be very careful that you didn't defer to him too much," Knuble said. "You knew what he could do, but it wasn't like, 'Force it. Force it. Force it to him all the time,' " Knuble said. "When you had a chance and you were in a high-percentage scoring area, you had to shoot the puck. You can't look (for him). You couldn't defer all the time."

As Knuble's time with the Caps wound down, Washington brought in another right winger to help add scoring depth and leadership and further add to Ovechkin's arsenal, acquiring 2010 Stanley Cup champion Troy Brouwer. The big winger from Vancouver moved around the lineup but often found himself opposite Ovechkin during his four years in D.C.

> "YOU HAD TO WORK HARD TO BE ON HIS LINE, BUT YOU SAW THE BENEFITS OF IT AS A TEAM – Troy Brouwer

ALEX OVECHKIN & TROY BROUWER

The first thing Brouwer recalled when it came to playing alongside Ovechkin was how "demanding" of a role being on his line was. "It was a lot of fun to watch him do what he does, but it was also a lot of work to be on his line to make sure that you were able to help somebody and contribute," Brouwer said. "He would go. He'd hit. He'd score highlight-reel goals. He'd do all that kind of stuff, but he was a demanding linemate. He was one of those guys that was like, you know, 'Get me the puck and I'll make you look good.' "

Despite the difficulties of playing that role, Brouwer embraced it and even relished it as he saw it pay off in his production. From 2011-12 to '14-15, he had two seasons of 20-plus goals and 40-plus points with the Capitals. "You had to work hard to be on his line, but you saw the benefits of it as a team," Brouwer said.

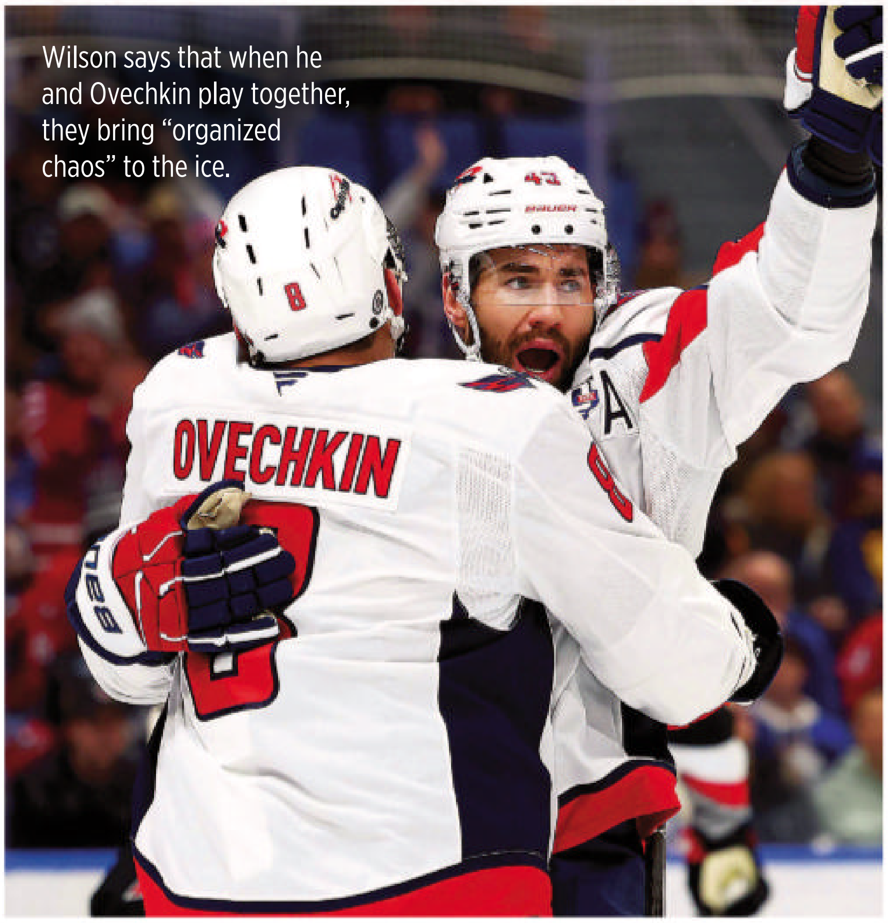
TOP: GEOFF BURKE-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: ERIC BOLTE-USA TODAY SPORTS

He then added with a laugh: "And also selfishly, if you got (the puck) to him, you had a great chance to get an assist and a point, and the team would score a goal."

It wasn't just at 5-on-5 that it was a challenging role; the power play was a beast of its own, and Brouwer played an entirely different role. Ovechkin has been the face of the Caps' power play since he entered the league in 2005, and no one has scored more on the man advantage than 'The Great 8,' who has 321 PP goals – and counting – through 20 seasons.

When it comes to lining up at 5-on-4 or 5-on-3 with Ovechkin, there was one primary rule: no going into Ovechkin's 'office,' which is famously located at the top of the left faceoff circle. "He wasn't going to move, and he was going to stand in his spot," Brouwer joked. "He was dangerous."

Brouwer was primarily the screen man, going to the top of the crease and blocking the goalie's eyes while looking for a dirty goal in front. And for a young Brouwer, he had to take a certain approach when Ovechkin teed up for a one-timer – which averaged 90-100 miles per hour. "You get pretty good at understanding where he's trying to shoot depending on where the pass is coming from and where the defenders are," Brouwer said. "You try and create a screen as much as you can, but at the end of the day, he's got such a good shot that you just try not to get in the way, because he can beat a goalie clean from where he shoots from."



Wilson says that when he and Ovechkin play together, they bring "organized chaos" to the ice.

TIMOTHY T. LUDWIG-IMAGN IMAGES

> "IT'S A LOT OF FUN TO PLAY WITH HIM. YOU JUST WANT TO **GET HIM THE PUCK AS MUCH AS YOU CAN** – Tom Wilson

As time went on, Ovechkin's career evolved. He embraced his role as captain, and while the goals continued to pile up, so did his desire to lift the Stanley Cup. All the while, his linemates continued to change.

He played with just about anyone – from Joey Crabb to Jay Beagle.

But there was one constant: Nicklas Backstrom as his center. No player has assisted on more Ovechkin goals than No. 19, who had done it 279 times before stepping away from the game in 2023 due to chronic hip issues. "Every time you get a chance to practise or play with Ovi, it's amazing," said Backstrom in 2023. "Ovi's Ovi. He's always going to get it done, you know? That's the kind of player he is, and that's who he is."

In 2017-18, Evgeny Kuznetsov took the reins from Backstrom as Ovechkin's center, while Tom Wilson stepped into that hardworking role on the other wing. The trio combined for a lot of success, and after a 49-goal season for Ovechkin, he added 15 more in the playoffs to pave the way to the franchise's first Stanley Cup.

For Wilson, playing on a line with Ovechkin is something special. "Organized chaos" is what Wilson would come to term it. "We could just (go out) guns-a-blazing, flying all over the ice," Wilson said, "and the center would kind of slow us down and create some space out there."

The M.O. was the same for Wilson as it was for his predecessors: get Ovechkin the puck and good things would happen. "It's a lot of fun to play with him," Wilson said. "You just want to try and get him the puck as much as you can, and obviously, he'll find the back of the net."

Eventually, the departures of Backstrom and Kuznetsov left Ovechkin in need of a new permanent first-line center, and he's found that in Dylan Strome, who came to D.C. on a one-year deal in 2022. He's since become a staple down the middle for the Caps and has signed an extension through the 2027-28 season.

For Strome, there's added responsibility there, especially with Ovechkin now 39 years old and on the verge of making history. However, the chemistry between the two has been natural from the get-go, and a lot of that is due to how Strome approaches his role.

That means not just putting the puck on a platter, as Knuble mentioned; it means being prepared for anything because Ovechkin can dish the puck just as well as he can shoot it. "He obviously wants the puck in an area to shoot, but you got to be ready for the puck at all times," Strome said. "He's a great passer. I feel like people don't give enough credit for how good of a passer he is. It looks like he's going to shoot, draws four or five guys to him somewhere, then passes it. So you gotta give him the puck when he's loaded up. That's when he wants it. "If he's open, you're going to want to pass to him, but you also have got to trust yourself and trust your shot and your instinct at the time. He's happier than anyone when someone else scores."

As Ovechkin continues to chip away toward 895, he's had a revolving door of other wingers on a stacked 2024-25 Capitals team, playing with the likes of Andrew Mangiapane, Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael on his other side while trying both the left and right wing.

At the end of the day, though, when it comes to skating alongside the Caps captain, so much of the role comes down to trusting your gut. "If your instincts are the guy that has 860 goals is open, you're probably going to want to pass the puck to him," said Strome with a laugh.

The rest should take care of itself.

DREW DOUGHTY

ERIC BOLTE-USA TODAY SPORTS

INJURIES KEPT **DREW DOUGHTY** ON THE SIDELINES AND OUT OF THE SPOTLIGHT, BUT A STEELY RESOLVE LANDED HIM A 4 NATIONS TITLE – AND HE'S EYEING ANOTHER CUP RING AS WELL **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

DETERMINED DREW

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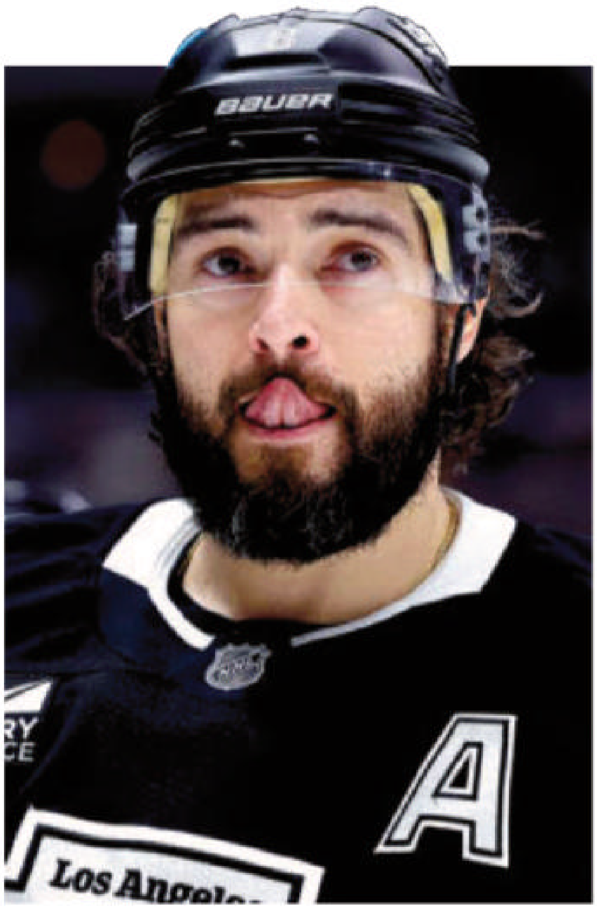
SILVER SURFING
Doughty is charged for a shot at the Cup with youngsters like Byfield.

RYAN SUN-IMAGN IMAGES

YOU'D BE FORGIVEN IF you hadn't been thinking a lot about Drew Doughty heading into 2024-25.

By his own admission, the Los Angeles Kings stalwart and future Hall of Famer had been out of the spotlight for a while – and he wasn't happy about it. That's why making Team Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off squad was so important to him. Doughty fought his way back from a broken ankle he sustained in the pre-season to ensure he could come in and contribute. "I haven't accomplished a lot in, I don't know how many years," Doughty said. "I haven't won a playoff round since we won the Cup, which is not something that I'm about. I'm a competitor. I want to be playing in big games and Stanley Cup finals. It's good for me to be here to resurrect my career a little bit. I think a lot of people have written me off, but I'm going to show them they're wrong."



DREW DOUGHTY

TOP: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

> “I HAVEN’T WON A PLAYOFF ROUND SINCE WE WON THE CUP, **WHICH IS NOT SOMETHING THAT I’M ABOUT**
>
> – Drew Doughty

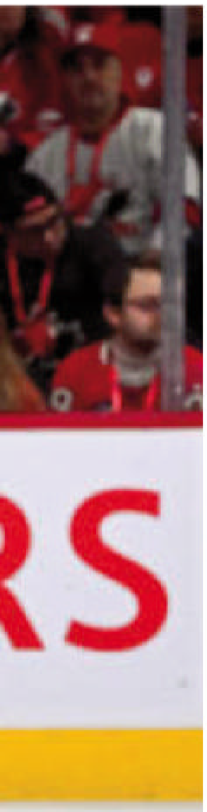
In the end, Doughty did indeed help Canada win the tournament, meaning his fallow stretch had officially come to a close. That Cup victory he referenced was way back in 2014, and as he pointed out, Los Angeles hasn’t been able to get out of the first round since. At 35, Doughty has done everything a player could hope for, from Cup championships to Olympic gold and now the 4 Nations (the title no one knew they wanted until the tournament began and became a red-hot success). And he looks back fondly at the crucial moments along the way. The 2010 Olympics, for example, saw him make a stacked Team Canada in just his third NHL season. An early gesture from Sidney Crosby helped him get settled. “I was a young guy, and he was young, too, but after one of our first practices, I was walking onto the bus, and he said, ‘Hey, come sit with me,’ ” Doughty said. “It just shows you the guy he is. He knew I was nervous as hell, and he brought me in.”

Those Olympics also taught Doughty to be who he is, which at the time meant a dazzling puck-carrier and difference-maker. “I remember after the first couple games, (Canada GM) Steve Yzerman came up to me in the room,” Doughty said. “He said, ‘Hey, I chose you for this team because of the player you are,’ because I was just passing the puck to veterans and keeping it simple. He told me to step up and play the way I play.”

Fast-forward a decade-and-a-half, and Doughty was at the 4 Nations, concentrating more on the

defensive side of things and letting the likes of Cale Makar and Josh Morrissey carry the offensive load for the blueline corps. Now, he was the veteran who the younger D-men could look at and learn from. "He talks a lot (on the ice)," said Vegas blueliner and Canada teammate Shea Theodore. "He's always loud. He's a good skater and so good at moving the puck."

Perhaps most important for Doughty was the mental aspect of things. Getting healthy for the Kings and Team Canada was a grind he had never experienced before. "Mentally, I was fine for the majority of the time," he said. "My kids keep me busy. When the guys were on the road, I had a lot of old teammates who live in L.A., so I was hanging out with them. I was fine until I was skating with the team but they weren't letting me play. That's when I started getting pissed off because I was sick of bag-skating, sick of practising. I just wanted to play. Thankfully, they didn't give in to me as early as I wanted. That was probably the right decision."



Doughty did get into a handful of games before the 4 Nations, and that was crucial for his inclusion on the final roster, where he was an injury replacement for Vegas' Alex Pietrangelo. "The road wasn't very long for him in returning to play and in how many games he could play," said Team Canada GM Don Sweeney. "What we did was make sure we watched every inch of ice Drew took once he came back to realize where he was at."

One of those games was against Tampa Bay. Lightning coach Jon Cooper was also Canada's bench boss for the 4 Nations, so he saw Doughty's readiness – and his determination – as originally Doughty wasn't even supposed to play in the game since it was part of a back-to-back. The Kings lost 3-0, but Doughty played 27:43. In his six games before the 4 Nations break, he averaged 26:57 of ice time per contest. Even after the 4 Nations, Doughty continued to log big minutes for the Kings, leading them in average ice time.

> "IT SUCKED. I'M NOT GONNA LIE. **COMING BACK FROM INJURY IS BRUTAL** – Drew Doughty

Along with Doughty, L.A. has a couple of holdovers from that 2014 Cup team, including captain Anze Kopitar and center Trevor Lewis. But a new generation is making its presence felt, led by Adrian Kempe and young stars Quinton Byfield and Brandt Clarke. The Kings entered the final stretch sitting in third in the Pacific, but they had some of the NHL's best advanced stats, meaning there was hope for a deep playoff push. The 4 Nations was a big motivator for Doughty's rehab efforts, but so was another Cup run. "I worked hard," he said. "It sucked. I'm not gonna lie. Coming back from injury is brutal. You do the same thing every day. You work your butt off every day and bag-skate. I just kept a straight mindset, and I had it in the back of my mind that I wasn't going to be on the (4 Nations) team, but I also just wanted to get back playing hockey for the Kings. We need to win some series this year, so I was determined to get back." H

CHILD'S PLAY
Spending time with his kids kept Doughty's mind busy while he was injured.

MIDDLE: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA-IMAGN IMAGES

NIKOLAJ EHLERS

TERRENCE LEE-IMAGN IMAGES

FLYING

NIKOLAJ EHLERS DOESN'T OWN a fur coat. In fairness, who does these days? But that this even arises in conversation with the Winnipeg Jets winger has little do with Ehlers expressing his sartorial wants or needs. It doesn't even have anything to do with bundling up when the mercury starts to dip in Winnipeg and Ehlers has to fend off the bitter, blustery and blistering cold. Rather, the gap in Ehlers' closet comes up because he's daydreaming, envisioning "probably the wildest Stanley Cup party you'll ever see."

That's when one of the most iconic photos in Winnipeg's sports history comes up.

The snapshot dates back to 2019, not long after the CFL's Winnipeg Blue Bombers won their first Grey Cup since 1990. It was at the parade that Chris Streveler arrived decked out in his championship finest: a fur coat, cut-off shorts and no shirt. Keep in mind, this was in the middle of November. It's that image, and the celebration that surrounded it, that

UNDER THE RADAR

NIKOLAJ EHLERS DOESN'T GET THE INK THAT HIS STAR TEAMMATES DO, BUT THAT'S NO INDICATION OF HIS ELITE LEVEL OF PLAY OR HIS IMPORTANCE TO THE JETS AS THEY CHASE THAT ELUSIVE CHAMPIONSHIP **BY JARED CLINTON**

gives Ehlers some fodder for his fantasy of the scenes on Portage Ave. when the Winnipeg Jets win a Stanley Cup. And if that were to come to pass this season, how would Ehlers feel about recreating Streveler's look? "It was cold when he did it," Ehlers laughed. "But, you know what? Maybe I'll give him a shout and see if he still has that."

Given how this season has gone for the Jets, it's well within the realm of possibility that Ehlers could be making that phone call, too. After all, Winnipeg was in the thick of the Presidents' Trophy race entering the home stretch, and Ehlers has played an integral part in helping the Jets in their pursuit of top spot.

There is, though, a tendency to forget about the 29-year-old when giving the Jets' roster its plaudits. That's through no fault of his own, either. But when Mark Scheifele is setting the franchise goal-scoring record, Josh Morrissey is putting his name in the Norris Trophy conversation and Connor Hellebuyck is further laying his claim to the title of Best Goaltender In The World, there's not much

NIKOLAJ EHLERS

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BAUER

spotlight left to share. And we haven't yet mentioned Kyle Connor or Gabe Vilardi – or that Ehlers has shared the ice with Blake Wheeler, Patrik Laine and Dustin Byfuglien during his time in Winnipeg.

But this season, again, has seen Ehlers slip under the radar, oh-so-quietly scoring at a point-per-game pace. It's an offensive output that has put him in line to better his career-best totals of 29 goals and 64 points, and it's going hand-in-hand with a year in which plenty has fallen Ehlers' way.

Take early November, for instance. Entering the season, Ehlers' 457 career points put him in pursuit of a meaningful milestone, as he trailed idol-turned-national teammate Frans Nielsen for the most points by a Danish NHLer. After a four-point effort against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Nov. 1, highlighted by Ehlers' first hat trick in six years, he went out two nights later and registered a goal and an assist against the Tampa Bay Lightning – his 473rd and 474th points – to surpass Nielsen on the all-time list. Two months later, Ehlers was celebrating his 500th point, making him the first Dane to hit the mark. “When you get into the league, your dream is to play in the league and stay in the league,” he said. “To be able to now hit that mark was pretty awesome, really cool, and I'm very, very proud of it considering that those are guys that I look up to.”

> “LOOK AT MY NUMBERS, YOU CAN SEE THAT **THE POWER PLAY HAS NOT BEEN THE BIG FACTOR** – Nikolaj Ehlers

That Ehlers set the league scoring record for his compatriots is made all the more fitting by its timing: it was just in September he starred as Denmark secured its spot in the 2026 Olympics, sealing qualification with two points in the clinching game against Norway. To Ehlers' thinking, it's no coincidence he's been able to use that as a launchpad toward a career year. “To play some games for Denmark, get that kind of success playing for them and qualifying for the Olympics, that puts you in a good, positive mindset,” he said.

That's not the only thing that has helped Ehlers build and maintain momentum. First and foremost, he started the campaign healthy. Before last season, he'd injured his neck, and the ailment cost him his pre-season and nagged him throughout the year. Arguably more important for his production, however, is that he has been a fixture on the NHL's top power play.

At times throughout Ehlers' 10 seasons in Winnipeg, at least among the fandom, his power-play usage has been a bugbear. In part, that's because his incredible speed – there's a good reason he's nicknamed ‘Fly’ – makes him a one-man zone-entry machine. Yet nailed-on first-unit duty has been elusive, as he's flitted from special-teams starter to second-unit hand with regularity over much of his time with the Jets. That is, until this season, where the minutes he's spent away from the top group can be counted on one hand. And Ehlers has made his power-play time count.

Through 57 games, he'd registered six power-play goals and 21 PP points. The former was just one short of his career high, while the latter was already eight clear of Ehlers' previous best. Whether contributing on the power play has bled into the rest of his game is a tricky question, with the answer residing somewhere between yes

JAMES CAREY LAUDER-USA TODAY SPORTS

As one of the longest-serving Jets, Ehlers knows how much a Cup would mean to fans in Winnipeg.

> “ANY TEAM THAT DOESN’T STAND WITH **THE STANLEY CUP AT THE END OF THE YEAR IS DISAPPOINTED**
>
> – Nikolaj Ehlers

and no. “You don’t want to need the power play to get that going,” he said. “Overall in my career, if you look at my numbers, you can see that the power play has not been the big factor.”

He’s right, too. Since his second season in the NHL, Ehlers has been one of the league’s best even-strength producers. His 373 points are the 29th-most among the nearly 300 players who’ve played 500 games over that span. And Ehlers has produced at that level while getting relatively modest ice time. No other player among the top 50 in even-strength scoring since 2016-17 has averaged fewer minutes than Ehlers, and his per-60-minute scoring rate is elite. He ranks 16th among 500-minute skaters, a fraction behind Evgeni Malkin and Steven Stamkos and ahead of Patrick Kane, Brayden Point and Mikko Rantanen. Ehlers is also ahead of teammates Scheifele and Connor.

That’s one major reason Ehlers will be essential to the Jets’ title pursuit, and he understands and welcomes the pressure. To hear him tell it, though, the weight of expectation is less external than internal. Sure, the Jets hear the noise, including the naysayers who view Winnipeg, which has only escaped the first playoff round once in the past six seasons, as a paper tiger in a stacked Central Division. It’s the Jets’ own standard that matters most, however.

“Are we happy with how last season ended? And the year before that? And the year before that?” Ehlers said. “Any team that doesn’t stand with the Stanley Cup at the end of the year is disappointed. We have something to prove to ourselves.”

And to be the last team standing, holding the Cup high with Winnipeg, might be more meaningful to Ehlers than just about anyone else. He’s the third-longest-tenured Jet on the roster. He’s played more games for the franchise all-time than all but six players. And whereas other major members of this roster have re-signed in Winnipeg – Scheifele and Hellebuyck inked twin seven-year deals in October 2023 – Ehlers is set to become a UFA at season’s end. That means there is no guarantee he’ll be back. No guarantee what the future will hold. No guarantee this won’t be his last chance to bring a championship to Winnipeg.

Given all that, Ehlers’ real fantasies aren’t about festivities, fur coats or the future. It’s delivering a lasting memory to the Jets faithful. “To give (a Stanley Cup) to a city that lost NHL hockey for 20-some years when they are bleeding hockey,” Ehlers said, “it would be a dream come true.” H

TOP: BOB FRID-USA TODAY SPORTS; BOTTOM: DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

SAM BENNETT

BOOM BOOM BENNETT

THE BIGGER THE GAME, THE BIGGER **SAM BENNETT** PLAYS. THE PANTHERS' BANG-AND-CRASHER BRINGS THE HITS – AND THE GOALS – WHEN IT MATTERS MOST, AND HE'S GUNNING FOR A SECOND CONSECUTIVE STANLEY CUP ON A FULLY LOADED FLORIDA TEAM **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

SHOULD YOU NEED A PRIMER on how to win a playoff series these days, taking a look at the Florida Panthers is a pretty good place to start. No team has played in as many series as the Cats have over the past two post-seasons, as they went from finalists to champions year over year. And when you play against the Panthers, you do not expect an easy series. They are big. They are hard. They are skilled. And they work. They are Sam Bennett. And if his contributions at the 4 Nations Face-Off are any indication, Bennett continues to play every shift as if the fate of the world is hanging in the balance. "He's what everyone wants on their team and hates to play against," said teammate Sam Reinhart. "He's always a threat, and he's so lethal with the puck on his stick. And there's that scare factor he has. When he's on the forecheck, you know he's out there. The bigger the game, the more he gives, and the more he rises to the occasion."

Bennett's versatility was on display at the 4 Nations when he suited up for Canada, as he fought Brady Tkachuk in the round-robin

SAM BENNETT

PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS

SAM BENNETT

BEWARE THE BEARD

Bennett ramps up his game – both offensively and physically – in the playoffs.

against Team USA, then punctured America's resolve in the championship game with a highlight-reel goal against two-time Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck. Bennett didn't even play in the first game of the tournament against Sweden, but he was more than ready when his name was called. And having played in so many crucial post-season games with Florida recently, he at least had some idea of what the intensity level was going to be like at the international showdown. "Especially playing in that Game 7 (against Edmonton to win the 2024 Stanley Cup), this is like four Game 7s," Bennett said. "All those games in the final the past two years is really the only thing close to the level in these games."

And when it comes to the playoffs, Bennett elevates. Across the 2022-23 and 2023-24 regular seasons, the powerful center averaged 0.61 points per game, just under the clip he's producing at this year. But in the playoffs, that number shot up to 0.74 points per game – just when the Panthers needed him most.

Though he was a high draft pick, going fourth overall to Calgary in 2014, it took a while for Bennett to find himself. In six-plus seasons with the Flames, he never had more than the 36 points he posted as a rookie, and he never hit 20 goals. The rough-and-tumble aspect of his game was there, but he struggled to find an identity.

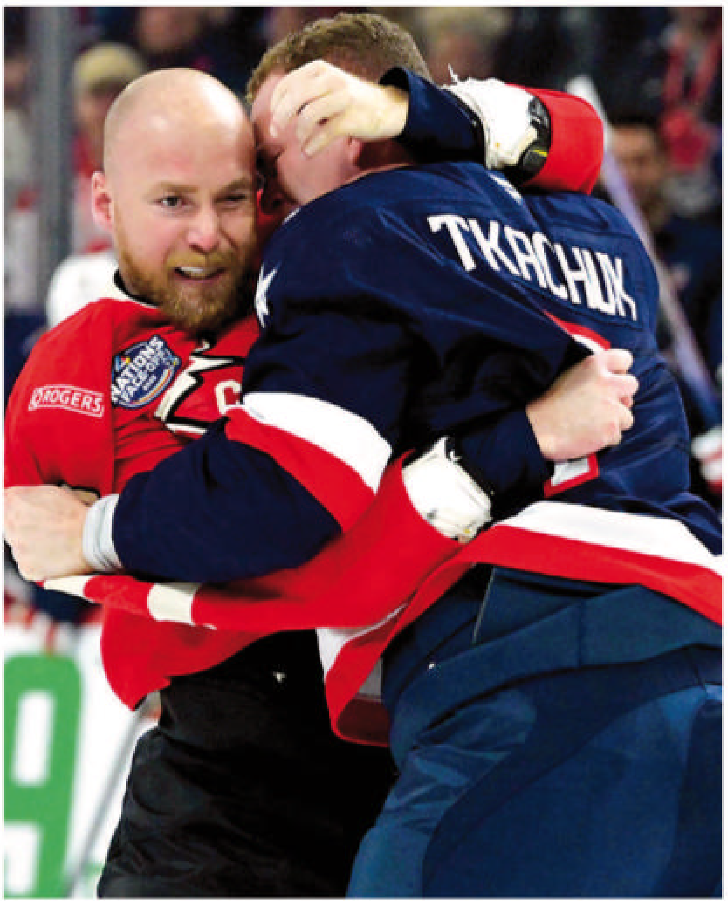
In April 2021, he was dealt to Florida along with a sixth-round pick in exchange for Emil Heineman and a second-rounder. While Heineman never played a game for Calgary (he's now in Montreal), Bennett discovered his full potential with the Panthers. "When I first got to there, I wasn't really sure of my role," Bennett said. "I didn't know if I was a center or a winger, but that role was given to me, and I was able to run with it. It really did change my whole perspective of who I was as a player. I always knew I had the ability. It was just a matter of getting the opportunity and taking advantage of that. It really changed my career."

With the Cats, Bennett has delivered his third season of 20-plus goals, and he has never produced fewer than 40 points, despite random injuries that have prevented him from playing a complete 82-game schedule in any of his four full seasons with the team. While the offense is nice, the other half of his game is that nasty physical edge he brings to the proceedings, something that tends to get amplified in the playoffs when everyone is trying to win the ultimate prize. "I've learned how important that style is to winning," Bennett said. "You need guys on your team who are willing to do that to win, and it's not always the easiest thing to do, but it's important. Everyone needs to be more intense in the playoffs, and it was even more a part of my game in Calgary, but it has also helped me now."

The funny thing about Bennett becoming such a beast is that his NHL journey got off to a bit of a rough start. At the 2014 draft combine, he failed to complete a single rep at the pull-up station, causing social media to inflame:

BATTLE TESTED

Playing in the past two Cup finals helped Bennett prepare for the 4 Nations intensity.



SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; ERIC BOLTE-IMAGN IMAGES

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

This kid's supposed to be a top pick and he can't do a single pull-up? Obviously, it didn't matter – it never did, truly – but it's amusing to think that this trip was laid on a player who has become tougher than the steel pull-up bar itself. In truth, Bennett had an injured shoulder at the combine that required surgery a few months later. "I don't really think about it, to be honest," he said. "It's something that happened and is part of my life now, I guess. It's unfortunate that I didn't test out if I could do pull-ups before that, but it is what it is. It was tough in the moment, but I've never let it affect me."

Where Bennett has had a dramatic effect is in Florida. The Panthers have an enviable core led by the likes of Aleksander Barkov, Matthew Tkachuk, Sergei Bobrovsky and a handful of others. And if you ask the Cats' captain, you'll find that Bennett is right up there with the others in terms of importance. "He's the player everybody wants to play like," Barkov said. "He plays physical, skilled hockey, and that's the way we want to play in Florida. We want to keep it simple and play the right way, and that's how he plays. He carries the puck really well, he scores a lot of goals, and he's an intimidating player. It's great to watch close up. Luckily, I'm on the same team as him."

The feeling is mutual, and it's not hard to see why the Panthers have had so much success lately. They don't depend on one superstar, and when the core is augmented by players such as Carter Verhaeghe and Gustav Forsling stepping up whenever necessary, it means the team can come at you in waves. Plus, they all have the experience of long playoff runs. "It's really important," Bennett said. "We're all so close as a team. We're all around the same age and get along really well. That core is all such good pros who take care of themselves and work hard on and off the ice. We definitely learn from each other, and we've been through so much the past three or four years. We have that experience and that friendship."

At this point, the Panthers are in that zone where it really doesn't matter where they finish in the regular season – they're a "get in and win" kind of franchise. The die has been cast by the past two runs to the Cup final, and there's already one banner hanging at Amerant Bank Arena. Bennett had a chance to play with Atlantic Division rivals such as Tampa Bay's Brayden Point and Toronto's Mitch Marner on Team Canada, and he's likely to face one or both of them at some point in the playoffs. If so, any past allegiances will be put on hold. Because when it's game time, Bennett is steadfast. "Anything that happens on the ice with me, it's never personal," he said. "I'm just doing whatever it takes to win."

ROBERTSON
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MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES

DALLAS STARS

STARS' TIME TO SHINE

With a deep and talented forward group, one of the league's best defense corps and top-notch goaltending, this is the year Dallas captures its second-ever Stanley Cup **BY JARED CLINTON**

IT WAS DURING A filmed sit-down between Peter DeBoer and Paul Maurice, which the NHL shared in the midst of its Global Series in Finland in November, that the Dallas Stars coach copped to providing some pro bono advice to his Florida Panthers counterpart during last season's Stanley Cup final.

A former Panthers coach in his own right, it wasn't necessarily any lingering allegiance on DeBoer's part that prompted his unsolicited advice, nor was it that he was looking to exact a measure of revenge against the Edmonton Oilers, who had defeated his Stars in the Western Conference final. Rather, it was the relationship between DeBoer and Maurice, who've been comrades since their playing days with the OHL's Windsor Spitfires nearly

STANLEY CUP PLAYOFFS 2025

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

MIKKO RANTANEN

four decades ago. So, watching Maurice take another shot at Stanley Cup glory, DeBoer simply couldn't help himself. "I was sending you texts," said DeBoer to Maurice. " 'I see something. I'm sure he sees it. But if I don't send it and he hasn't seen it, I'm not going to be able to sleep at night if he doesn't win. So, I'm going to send it.' "

How much DeBoer's advice helped Maurice and Florida en route to their thrilling Game 7 series victory is anyone's guess. But Maurice jokingly replied he and his coaching staff were "mapping out the texts" as the series stretched to its winner-take-all conclusion. More certain, though, is that Maurice wouldn't hesitate to return the favor. And that opportunity could very well come this spring. Maurice's third trip to the Cup final was the charm. After two of his own, the first in 2012 with the New Jersey Devils and second in 2016 with the San Jose Sharks, could the same be true for DeBoer?

Unlike years prior, where one prohibitive favorite stands apart or a pair of teams feel fated to slug it out in the final, this season has brought a more wide open but remarkably deep field. The Winnipeg Jets and Washington Capitals were going blow-for-blow in pursuit of the Presidents' Trophy. But right on the fringe of the race, eight points off the pace in mid-March? DeBoer's Stars, who we selected in our annual Yearbook as our Cup favorite and who we are once again backing to hoist the sport's greatest prize come June.

What gave us confidence in Dallas then and continues to do so now is that these Stars appear singularly primed to take the next step.

Barring the hiccup that was the playoff-less 2020-21 campaign, Dallas' recent post-season track record is among the NHL's best. In the past five seasons, the Stars have won 38 playoff games. That's more wins than all but the Colorado Avalanche, Vegas Golden Knights and Tampa Bay Lightning, who have combined to win four of the past five titles, and only the latter two clubs have more series victories than the Stars, who've won seven since 2020. For those whose post-season hobbyhorse is experience – and Lord Stanley knows it's the watchword for each of the league's GMs – the Stars have it in droves.

It is true, too, that such trials have a habit of breeding the post-season poise that champions require. That gives De-

The Hockey News
POWER RANKINGS

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2	**FLORIDA** PANTHERS
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4	**COLORADO** AVALANCHE
5	**VEGAS** GOLDEN KNIGHTS
6	**TORONTO** MAPLE LEAFS
7	**EDMONTON** OILERS
8	**CAROLINA** HURRICANES
9	**WASHINGTON** CAPITALS
10	**TAMPA BAY** LIGHTNING
11	**LOS ANGELES** KINGS
12	**NEW JERSEY** DEVILS
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14	**NEW YORK** RANGERS
15	**OTTAWA** SENATORS
16	**VANCOUVER** CANUCKS
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‘OTTER’ THIS WORLD

Oettinger excels in the spring. Need proof? His playoff save percentage ranks in the top 50 all-time.

PETER
DEBOER

Boer faith in his charges, even if the Stars’ path to the Cup could see them battle the Jets and Avalanche before even getting a crack at the conference crown. “There’s a composure to our group,” DeBoer said in March. “They’ve been on long runs. They know there’s no panic in situations. I like that. At the same time, there’s still that question out there, who’s going to deliver at the most important time for us, at all positions? We’ve still all got to answer that.”

Luckily, no team has more potential answers to that question than the Stars. And that has only become more true following a trade deadline that saw Dallas GM Jim Nill pull off the blockbuster acquisition of Mikko Rantanen.

In Rantanen – whose trade odyssey saw him move from Colorado to Carolina to Dallas in a six-week span – the Stars landed one of the game’s elite producers. From the start of 2020-21 through to the trade deadline, the only players who posted more points than Rantanen are his former Avs teammate Nathan MacKinnon and the Oilers’ superstar duo of Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. Rantanen’s post-season production, too, stands to elevate the Stars from top contender to out-and-out favorite. Among active players, Rantanen’s 1.25 points per playoff game is again the fourth-best mark and again behind only the aforementioned trio.

Even before Rantanen’s arrival, however, the Stars had one of the league’s deepest attacks, with 13 players netting at least 20 points by the end of February, the second-most in the NHL. That includes first-line pivot Roope Hintz, young star Wyatt Johnston and Jason Robertson, who rounded into form following a 4 Nations Face-Off snub and was tied for third in NHL goal-scoring from December to March. And that is to say nothing of Matt Duchene, the Stars’ leading scorer through 60 games, or captain Jamie Benn, who has become an indispensable middle-six contributor. It’s also worth noting that while the Stars have yet to give a definitive timeline for Tyler Seguin’s return, there’s every possibility it coincides with the beginning of the playoffs. He had nine goals and 20 points in 19 games before he landed on the shelf.

But it’s not just the offense that has us bullish on Dallas. While many teams would struggle to weather the loss of a bona fide all-star defenseman, the performance of Thomas Harley in the absence of Miro Heiskanen has furthered our belief in the Stars’ blueline. Indeed, while something of a revelation last season after a stop-start beginning to his big-league career, Harley solidified himself as a certifiable top-pairing rearguard during his stint as Dallas’ de facto No. 1. That was further evident in his emergency recall to Canada’s 4 Nations Face-Off roster, where he played two games, including logging the third-highest ice time in Canada’s overtime victory in the championship game.

After that tournament, at which DeBoer was an assistant, the Stars coach told reporters it represented a coming-out party for Harley. “The way he answered the bell, the way he played in those situations, I think was even more impressive to everybody,” DeBoer said. “He’s come back a more confident player. He’s got a little more swagger to him, which he should. Sometimes, as a young player, you don’t realize the level you’re at until you get put in that situation with the best players and against the best players in the world and realize, ‘I can do this. Not only can I do this, but I can thrive in this environment.’ ”

With Heiskanen targeting a playoff return, Harley’s emergence and Esa Lindell’s underrated excellence, Dallas has a

OETTINGER: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; DEBOER: MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES

defensive triumvirate arguably better than any in the NHL. It doesn't hurt, either, that while the Stars already had veteran experience in Matt Dumba and Ilya Lyubushkin, Nill shored up the defense corps by acquiring Cody Ceci. A blockbuster acquisition? No. But Ceci played a steady second-pairing role for the Oilers during their run to last season's Cup final and will slot in further down the pecking order when the Stars' defense is at full strength.

It should be said, though, that despite the defensive depth and favorable underlying percentages – Dallas ranks sixth in 5-on-5 expected goals percentage, seventh in scoring chance percentage and fifth in high-danger chance percentage – it's not all one-way traffic with Dallas. The Stars fall toward the middle of the pack in five-a-side shots, attempts, chances and even expected goals against. But despite the attempts they surrender, Dallas maintained the third-lowest goals against per game by March. The Stars' league-leading penalty kill – it was operating at 84.2 percent – goes some of the way to explaining their staunch defensive record.

And then there's Jake Oettinger. In five seasons, Oettinger has established himself as one of the league's most reliable keepers. To wit, 30 goalies have started at least 82 games since Oettinger's debut. Of those, Oettinger sits tied for ninth with a .913 save percentage, only narrowly behind Juuse Saros and Andrei Vasilevskiy. And after a statistical step backward last season, Oettinger was among the league leaders in wins and held a .910 SP, tied for 10th among the 30 goalies with at least 30 starts entering March. Buoying Oettinger's numbers has been his shorthanded play. He had an .884 SP when Dallas was down a skater. Only three goaltenders had seen as much time on the kill while posting better numbers.

WYATT JOHNSTON

Oettinger is no stranger to post-season magic, either. He boasts a career .916 SP across 47 playoff outings, good for the 39th-best mark all-time among netminders with at least 25 games played. And Oettinger's performance in a first-round defeat in 2022 – a .954 SP and 1.81 goals-against average in a seven-game defeat – remains among the best single-series performances in a losing effort.

Of course, none of Oettinger, three Grade-A defenders or a dangerous attack alters the fact that the Western Conference, and more particularly the Central Division, has a habit of taking its pound of flesh. This year is no different. But the battle-tested Stars have run this gauntlet before: Dallas has taken down Vegas, Colorado (twice each), as well as the Calgary Flames, Minnesota Wild and Seattle Kraken over the past five post-seasons.

The road ahead for Dallas will be as tough, maybe even tougher, this season. But we believe it is the Stars' time to bring the franchise's second championship to Dallas – and come the final, perhaps DeBoer won't be dishing out his advice so much as putting it into action.

WHAT'S INSIDE

TEAM PREVIEW

The skinny on each club in playoff contention as of mid-March, excluding deadline sellers (BOS, NYI, etc.)

FANTASY ZONE

Each team's 10 best potential fantasy performers, ranked by Jason Chen. Players who might still be injured at the start of the playoffs are indicated with a ⊞. Stats as of March 16.

X-FACTOR

Intangibles are difficult to quantify, but they can play a big part in teams getting hot and going on a playoff roll.

DEPTH CHART

Each team's projected roster to start the playoffs. Players on LTIR and not expected to return are noted with a ⊞.

1ST CUP PASS

Which grizzled veteran or sentimental favorite deserves the captain's initial handoff of Lord Stanley's glorious mug?

BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

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CALGARY FLAMES

THE X-FACTOR

Calgary does have the worst offense in the NHL, but a bright way of looking at that situation is they have a lot of dormant production poised to break through. Jonathan Huberdeau has bounced back from two poor seasons and has shown there's room for more. Nazem Kadri is always a beast in the playoffs. Blake Coleman and Yegor Sharangovich are well below the 30-goal mark they hit last season. And Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee have ramped up their play following slow starts after coming over from Philly. That doesn't mean things will improve. It's just that it can't really get any worse.

DUSTIN WOLF

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

IF THE FLAMES make the playoffs, it will be largely due to one player: Dustin Wolf. The rookie goalie will surely be a finalist for the Calder Trophy. But upon closer examination, he should probably get some down-ballot votes for the Vezina and Hart Trophies, too.

Calgary started the year predicted to be an NHL bottom-feeder. Many had the Flames among the three worst teams in the league. The offense looked sketchy, the blueline was largely rebuilt and the goaltending was unproven after the departure of Jacob Markstrom.

Wolf stepped in and had posted the fifth-best save percentage (.915), was tied for 12th in wins and 17th in goals-against average. He has kept the Flames in games where they had no business even earning a loser point, let alone winning.

And if the Flames are to win even a couple of games in the playoffs, Wolf will have to be at his very best. That's because Calgary sat 32nd in goals for – both total and at 5-on-5. No Flame was on pace for 30 goals or 60 points, and only three forwards were on pace for 40-plus points.

The Flames went 25 straight games earlier this season scoring three or fewer goals. There's little margin for error.

Coach Ryan Huska preaches defensive structure, and for the most part, the Calgary defense has performed admirably for a team with five blueliners in their first full year with the squad. But breakdowns happen when the Flames take a penalty – they ranked second in penalty minutes per game (10:20) – and the penalty kill ranked near the bottom of the league.

So you see how valuable Wolf is to the team. In four of the past five seasons, he was named top goalie in his league – twice in the WHL and twice in the AHL. And if he hadn't split last season between the AHL and NHL, it might have been five years in a row. **– BRIAN COSTELLO**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Jonathan Huberdeau	**1.** Nazem Kadri	**1.** Matt Coronato
2. Joel Farabee	**2.** Mikael Backlund	**2.** Blake Coleman
3. Yegor Sharangovich	**3.** Morgan Frost	**3.** Connor Zary
4. Ryan Lomberg	**4.** Kevin Rooney	**4.** Martin Pospisil
5. Adam Klapka	**5.** Justin Kirkland ⊞	**5.** Anthony Mantha ⊞

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. MacKenzie Weegar	**5.** Joel Hanley	**1.** Dustin Wolf
2. Rasmus Andersson	**6.** Brayden Pachal	**2.** Dan Vladar
3. Kevin Bahl	**7.** Daniil Miromanov	**3.** Devin Cooley
4. Jake Bean	**8.** Ilya Solovyov	

⊞ LTIR

F1RST CUP PASS

RASMUS ANDERSSON is the spiritual leader of the Flames, and, next to captain Mikael Backlund, he is the longest-serving Flame. So it will go from one Swede to another.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Nazem Kadri	64	23	25	48	17	0.75	52	19	25	44	11	0.85	★★
Jonathan Huberdeau	64	24	24	48	17	0.75	26	5	16	21	7	0.81	★★
MacKenzie Weegar	64	7	31	38	18	0.59	20	1	4	5	1	0.25	★★
Matt Coronato	59	16	16	32	12	0.54	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Blake Coleman	64	12	18	30	4	0.47	65	12	19	31	0	0.48	★
Morgan Frost	63	13	17	30	9	0.48	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Rasmus Andersson	64	8	14	22	7	0.34	27	7	7	14	4	0.52	★
Mikael Backlund	64	11	13	24	6	0.38	42	12	10	22	6	0.52	★
Yegor Sharangovich	56	12	11	23	7	0.41	3	0	0	0	0	0.00	★
Connor Zary	49	12	12	24	9	0.49	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Dustin Wolf	22-12-5		3	2.53		.915	-		-	-		-	★★
Dan Vladar	8-11-6		2	2.98		.893	0-0		0	3.70		.864	★

FANTASY ZONE

In short, **DUSTIN WOLF** has been excellent wherever he's played despite being an overlooked seventh-round pick. Wolf is a two-time winner of the AHL's best-goalie award and the 2022-23 AHL MVP, but the one thing that has eluded him is a league championship. It's no fault of his own, however, as the California native has a .922 SP and 2.50 GAA in 28 career AHL playoff games.

POWER RANKING | 8TH

CAROLINA HURRICANES

SEBASTIAN **AHO**

AT THIS POINT, we know what coach Rod Brind'Amour's Hurricanes are all about. They're a hard forechecking team that dominates possession, and the advanced-stats community loves them. What they don't have yet is a signature playoff run.

It was looking good when the Canes acquired Mikko Rantanen – but less so after they turned around and traded him to Dallas after a month. But this is still an excellent team, and with Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Seth Jarvis up front, the offense should not be a problem. Shutdown center Jordan Staal is another key forward, while Jordan Martinook and Eric Robinson are big dudes who are not fun to face.

The defense corps features one of the NHL's best (and criminally underrated) in Jaccob Slavin, and there's a variety of solid contributors behind him. The Hurricanes have size and experience thanks to Brent Burns and Dmitry Orlov, plus puck-movers in Shayne Gostisbehere and Sean Walker, not to mention a rising late-bloomer in Jalen Chatfield.

Brind'Amour will face his biggest decision in net. Frederik Andersen, 35, had a better save percentage, goals-against average and goals saved above expected per 60 rate than 25-year-old Pyotr Kochetkov, but Andersen had only played 13 games through mid-March after losing a big chunk of the season due to knee surgery.

The Hurricanes are in the top 10 on both offense and defense (always a good sign), while the penalty kill is one of the league's best. On the other hand, the power play has been a weak spot, with Carolina ranking 26th – which is puzzling considering their weapons.

The Hurricanes have the makeup and metrics to make a run to the championship. Now, they have to prove they're more than paper tigers. If they can, a second banner will be hung in Raleigh. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

THE X-FACTOR

Talk about consistency: in six straight playoff appearances, Sebastian Aho has led or tied for the lead in team scoring for the Hurricanes. He has tallied either 11 or 12 points in each of those runs, putting him at nearly a point-per-game pace. While Aho wasn't effective at the 4 Nations for Finland, there's no questioning his ability to generate offense in postseason games. In some years, he has been the only Hurricane really producing, so Carolina will need others to follow his example. With a couple of high-motor talents on his wings in Seth Jarvis and Jackson Blake, Aho is primed for success once again.

F1RST CUP PASS

At 40, defenseman **BRENT BURNS** has accomplished plenty in his 21-year career, but he has yet to win a Stanley Cup. Imagine his reaction in getting the trophy from captain Jordan Staal.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Andrei Svechnikov	**1.** Sebastian Aho	**1.** Seth Jarvis
2. Taylor Hall	**2.** Jordan Staal	**2.** Logan Stankoven
3. Jordan Martinook	**3.** Jesperi Kotkaniemi	**3.** Jackson Blake
4. William Carrier 🟥	**4.** Mark Jankowski	**4.** Jack Roslovic
5. Eric Robinson	**5.** Tyson Jost	**5.** Jesper Fast 🟥

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Jaccob Slavin	**5.** Shayne Gostisbehere	**1.** Pyotr Kochetkov
2. Brent Burns	**6.** Sean Walker	**2.** Frederik Andersen
3. Dmitry Orlov	**7.** Scott Morrow	**3.** Dustin Tokarski
4. Jalen Chatfield	**8.** Ty Smith	

🟥 INJURED

FANTASY ZONE

As Carolina makes its seventh consecutive playoff appearance, the Canes' hopes run through center **SEBASTIAN AHO**. He is again without a proven playoff scorer on his wing after Jake Guentzel ended up in Tampa and Mikko Rantanen was traded to Dallas, but that doesn't seem to matter, as no Hurricane has come close to Aho's 0.95 points per playoff game in that time.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Sebastian Aho	64	24	38	62	19	0.97	74	27	43	70	15	0.95	★★★★★
Andrei Svechnikov	63	18	25	43	17	0.68	51	15	21	36	12	0.71	★★★★
Seth Jarvis	58	26	23	49	13	0.84	40	13	14	27	9	0.68	★★★★
Jack Roslovic	64	20	11	31	2	0.48	36	2	11	13	2	0.36	★★★
Shayne Gostisbehere	57	7	28	35	21	0.61	32	2	6	8	4	0.25	★★★
Logan Stankoven	61	10	20	30	7	0.49	19	3	5	8	0	0.42	★★
Brent Burns	65	5	17	22	2	0.34	120	23	52	75	30	0.63	★★
Jackson Blake	65	11	11	22	3	0.34	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Taylor Hall	61	10	18	28	3	0.46	39	14	15	29	8	0.74	★★
Jordan Staal	65	12	21	33	0	0.51	147	36	34	70	9	0.48	★★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Pyotr Kochetkov	24-11-3		1	2.43		.905	1-4		0	4.01		.863	★★
Frederik Andersen	8-5-0		1	2.17		.911	38-30		3	2.46		.914	★★

DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

COLORADO AVALANCHE

THE X-FACTOR

Forget the deadline moves. Maybe the most important acquisition was Mackenzie Blackwood. From his arrival in December to the deadline in March, Blackwood's .921 save percentage was third-best in the NHL behind only Andrei Vasilevskiy and Connor Hellebuyck. But how will he fare in the post-season? In his seven NHL seasons, Blackwood has yet to see a minute of playoff action. In fact, since turning pro nine years ago, his playoff experience is limited to just nine games (five in the ECHL, four in the AHL). How he handles the bright lights and the big stage will go a long way to determining Colorado's fate.

NATHAN **MACKINNON**

COLORADO WANTED to upgrade its roster at the deadline, but one thing led to another, and GM Chris MacFarland so reshaped his Avalanche that they'll enter the post-season in some ways unrecognizable from the team that hit the ice to start the season in October.

While all of the dealing was prefaced by the Mikko Rantanen blockbuster that brought Martin Necas and Jack Drury to Colorado, the Avalanche exited deadline day having restructured how they look down the middle. First, Colorado acquired Brock Nelson from the New York Islanders. Then, they nabbed Charlie Coyle from Boston. Center depth was perhaps the Avalanche's Achilles heel, but suddenly, a position of perceived frailty is now one of strength. That's especially true when reigning Hart Trophy winner Nathan MacKinnon is running the first line – and essentially the entire offense.

Adding center depth might have been enough, too, to bolster Colorado's Cup hopes. But that's not all the Avs achieved, as MacFarland also added blueliner Ryan Lindgren from the New York Rangers. There's no unseating perennial Norris Trophy contender Cale Makar and partner Devon Toews from the top pairing, but Lindgren and Josh Manson form a solid second unit.

Adding defensive strength can go a long way for Colorado, especially if it bleeds over into the penalty kill. Given the roster facelift, it might only be the team's play while shorthanded that remains a weakness. The Avs had a top-10 power play, averaged the seventh-most shots per game and fourth-fewest shots against per game. But the penalty kill? It operated at 79.6 percent, good for just 14th. Against other high-octane power plays in the Central Division, that might be the only thing that could prove to be problematic. **– JARED CLINTON**

F1RST CUP PASS

He's new in town, but no Avalanche player has more games played without a championship than **CHARLIE COYLE**. He's earned his chance to hoist Lord Stanley's Cup.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Gabriel Landeskog ✚	**1.** Nathan MacKinnon	**1.** Martin Necas
2. Artturi Lehkonen	**2.** Brock Nelson	**2.** Valeri Nichushkin
3. Jonathan Drouin	**3.** Charlie Coyle	**3.** Ross Colton
4. Joel Kiviranta	**4.** Parker Kelly	**4.** Logan O'Connor
5. Jimmy Vesey	**5.** Miles Wood	**5.** Jack Drury

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Cale Makar	**5.** Ryan Lindgren	**1.** Mackenzie Blackwood
2. Devon Toews	**6.** Keaton Middleton	**2.** Scott Wedgewood
3. Samuel Girard	**7.** Erik Johnson	**3.** Trent Miner
4. Josh Manson	**8.** Sam Malinski	✚ INJURED

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Nathan MacKinnon	66	27	75	102	33	1.55	88	48	66	114	40	1.30	★★★★★
Cale Makar	66	24	51	75	30	1.14	72	21	59	80	32	1.11	★★★★★
Martin Necas	66	22	50	72	30	1.09	59	11	19	30	8	0.51	★★★★
Brock Nelson	64	20	24	44	4	0.69	78	27	23	50	7	0.64	★★★
Valeri Nichushkin	28	15	8	23	4	0.82	72	23	12	35	7	0.49	★★★
Artturi Lehkonen	54	27	14	41	4	0.76	71	23	20	43	8	0.61	★★★
Devon Toews	62	7	25	32	2	0.52	77	11	40	51	11	0.66	★★
Jonathan Drouin	33	9	19	28	6	0.85	36	6	18	24	11	0.67	★★
Ross Colton	49	15	8	23	6	0.47	63	11	12	23	3	0.37	★
Charlie Coyle	67	15	8	23	3	0.34	119	25	27	52	13	0.44	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Mackenzie Blackwood	24-16-6		3	2.50		.915	-		-	-		-	★★★★
Scott Wedgewood	8-6-1		2	2.49		.908	0-0		0	2.28		.862	★

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

FANTASY ZONE

The Avs will have no problems scoring goals, but they'll need to grind their way through games at some point. They committed to **MACKENZIE BLACKWOOD** as their goalie of the future soon after acquiring him, but it's a big bet on a netminder who hasn't played a playoff game at any level since five ECHL outings with the Adirondack Thunder in 2017-18. He's a fantasy risk.

POWER RANKING | 17TH

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

THE BLUE JACKETS ARE one of the best surprises of the season. Despite being slotted far outside the playoff picture by most pre-season pundits, Columbus has simply found ways to win under new coach Dean Evason.

Offense is a strength in Columbus, especially at 5-on-5, where the Jackets were one of the NHL's most prolific during the regular season. Keeping the puck out of the net was more of a chore, however, as the team struggled on defense and had a bottom-10 penalty kill. Part of the issue is goaltending, where Elvis Merzlikins was just as likely to surrender five goals as he was to give up one. The advanced stats have him outside of the NHL's top 30 as well.

Scoring your way out of trouble typically doesn't work in the playoffs, but it's worth noting that two-way center Sean Monahan has missed considerable time due to injury.

Otherwise, the Jackets have a legitimate Norris Trophy candidate leading the way in Zach Werenski, and his ability to log big minutes on the back end will be crucial for any kind of post-season run. After years of rebuilding, the kids are starting to take over, with Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov and Kent Johnson all playing big offensive roles.

There's also a bit of magic in Columbus right now. The tragic loss of Johnny Gaudreau during the summer could have cast a pall over the franchise, but instead, the memory of Gaudreau and brother Matthew has clearly inspired the Blue Jackets, who are playing their best hockey in years.

Add in role players such as Mathieu Olivier, the rare new heavyweight fighter who can also score and kill penalties, and you have a heavy, playoff-style lineup ready to battle. What the team may lack in superstars, it makes up for in grit, determination and enough skill to fill the net on a consistent basis. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

ZACH **WERENSKI**

THE X-FACTOR

Center Sean Monahan has been fantastic in his first season with the Blue Jackets after signing as a UFA. Not only was he the big, responsible first-line pivot they needed, but his veteran presence and preparation provided a great model for Adam Fantilli, who has blossomed as an NHL sophomore. A wrist injury robbed Monahan of the middle of the season, and while he was expected back around late March, it's key for him to be at full health for any sort of playoff charge. Though the Jackets played well in his absence, they were too far back for a top-three division finish and were still battling for a wild-card spot.

FIRST CUP PASS

Should Columbus shock the world, **ZACH WERENSKI** is going to play a major role. On a team that wins by committee, the blueliner has truly stood out.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Dmitri Voronkov	**1.** Sean Monahan	**1.** Kirill Marchenko
2. Kent Johnson	**2.** Adam Fantilli	**2.** Yegor Chinakhov
3. Boone Jenner	**3.** Cole Sillinger	**3.** Mathieu Olivier
4. Justin Danforth	**4.** Sean Kuraly	**4.** James van Riemsdyk
5. Christian Fischer	**5.** Luke Kunin	**5.** Zach Aston-Reese

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Zach Werenski	**5.** Erik Gudbranson 🟥	**1.** Elvis Merzlikins
2. Ivan Provorov	**6.** Denton Mateychuk	**2.** Daniil Tarasov
3. Dante Fabbro	**7.** Jake Christiansen	**3.** Jet Greaves
4. Damon Severson	**8.** Jordan Harris	🟥 INJURED

FANTASY ZONE

The Blue Jackets have had several tremendous performances, but no one has shone more than **ZACH WERENSKI**. Their longest-tenured defenseman has managed to stay healthy over the past two seasons, and a return to the playoffs would be his first in five years. Don't be surprised if he scores at an elite pace after putting up 13 points in 29 playoff games in previous appearances.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Zach Werenski	63	20	49	69	21	1.10	29	4	9	13	5	0.45	★★★
Kirill Marchenko	61	25	37	62	16	1.02	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★★
Adam Fantilli	64	21	21	42	4	0.66	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Sean Monahan	41	14	27	41	9	1.00	35	10	12	22	14	0.63	★★
Kent Johnson	50	21	24	45	12	0.90	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Boone Jenner	8	0	9	9	0	1.13	37	8	7	15	5	0.41	★★
Dmitri Voronkov	55	20	22	42	11	0.76	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Ivan Provorov	64	7	21	28	3	0.44	22	3	8	11	2	0.50	★
Cole Sillinger	54	9	20	29	3	0.54	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Yegor Chinakhov	25	7	7	14	5	0.56	-	-	-	-	-	-	★

GOALIE	**W-L-OT**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	**W-L**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	
Elvis Merzlikins	22-17-4	1	3.04	.896	1-1	0	1.96	.946	★★
Daniil Tarasov	7-7-2	1	3.54	.883	-	-	-	-	★

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

DALLAS STARS

THE X-FACTOR

How quickly is Tyler Seguin able to get back up to game speed? He's expected to return by the post-season after going under the knife in December, but it was the 33-year-old's second major hip surgery in little more than four years. There's no guarantee he returns to the form that saw him score nine goals and 20 points in 19 outings before he went on the shelf. If Seguin can contribute right away, the Stars' offense gets another significant upgrade. If he can't, it dashes any plans Dallas had on Seguin stepping in immediately as a key playoff performer when the team will likely face Colorado in Round 1.

JAKE
OETTINGER

THERE ARE TRADES that move the needle, and then there are trades that need an entirely new gauge. The Stars acquiring Mikko Rantanen at the deadline? That can easily be categorized as the latter, as not only did it see a top-five attack in the NHL add a top-six piece, it saw one of the league's best offenses bring aboard the fourth-highest-scoring forward in the NHL over the past five years.

And though, in Dallas, Rantanen won't have a running mate as lethal as Nathan MacKinnon, teams will have to game plan in an entirely different manner to slow down an offense that features Rantanen, Jason Robertson, Roope Hintz, Wyatt Johnston and (the resurgent) Matt Duchene. The Stars stand to have as many as five players eclipse the 30-goal plateau. That high-end depth will make them a handful for any opponent.

It might be for the best that Dallas can score in bunches. Though Miro Heiskanen, Thomas Harley and Esa Lindell form a stellar top trio on the back end, and while the addition of Cody Ceci helps round out the top four, the Stars have played more back-and-forth than expected. At five-a-side, despite positive percentages, Dallas was middling in shots, scoring chances and high-danger chances against per 60 minutes. Against other offensively gifted teams, ceding repeated opportunities could be a recipe for disaster.

However, even if Dallas is leaky in its own end at times, Jake Oettinger may be able to bail the Stars out. He's twice led Dallas to the Western Conference final, and his .915 save percentage across 47 career playoff games inspires confidence that he can steal games when it matters most. If all goes well up front, though, Oettinger could get by with simply being serviceable. **– JARED CLINTON**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Jason Robertson	1. Roope Hintz	1. Mikko Rantanen
2. Jamie Benn	2. Wyatt Johnston	2. Tyler Seguin ✚
3. Mason Marchment	3. Matt Duchene	3. Mikael Granlund
4. Evgenii Dadonov	4. Sam Steel	4. Mavrik Bourque
5. Matej Blumel	5. Oskar Back	5. Colin Blackwell

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Miro Heiskanen ✚	5. Ilya Lyubushkin	1. Jake Oettinger
2. Thomas Harley	6. Matt Dumba	2. Casey DeSmith
3. Esa Lindell	7. Nils Lundkvist ✚	3. Magnus Hellberg
4. Cody Ceci	8. Lian Bichsel	

✚ INJURED

F1RST CUP PASS

After captain Jamie Benn, the only active player with more games for the franchise is **TYLER SEGUIN**. He has helped define this generation for the Stars.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Mikko Rantanen	64	29	44	73	23	1.14	81	34	67	101	38	1.25	★★★★★
Jason Robertson	64	28	38	66	17	1.03	45	14	24	38	16	0.84	★★★★★
Wyatt Johnston	64	24	36	60	21	0.94	38	14	8	22	4	0.58	★★★★★
Matt Duchene	64	25	41	66	23	1.03	51	12	19	31	12	0.61	★★★★
Roope Hintz	59	25	27	52	15	0.88	78	21	36	57	23	0.73	★★★★
Thomas Harley	62	12	27	39	11	0.63	39	1	12	13	0	0.33	★★★★
Mikael Granlund	65	16	38	54	16	0.83	59	11	21	32	8	0.54	★★★
Jamie Benn	64	16	24	40	7	0.63	102	27	50	77	20	0.75	★★★
Mason Marchment	46	15	17	32	7	0.70	41	10	4	14	0	0.34	★★★
Miro Heiskanen ✚	50	5	20	25	7	0.50	85	16	45	61	25	0.72	★★★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**			**W-L**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**			
Jake Oettinger	30-14-2	1	2.48	.909			23-22	2	2.46	.916			★★★★★
Casey DeSmith	12-6-0	2	2.42	.914			1-1	0	2.02	.927			★

JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

FANTASY ZONE

The Stars made the biggest splash at the trade deadline by acquiring star right winger **MIKKO RANTANEN** with an eight-year extension in place. With Rantanen as the Stars' highest-paid forward going into next season, all eyes will be on him to take the lead. He's a proven playoff performer, with a Cup ring and 101 points in 81 career playoff games – the best PPG average of any Star.

DETROIT RED WINGS

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED to take this long, and there have been more than a few hiccups along the way, but six years into his tenure, former Red Wings star turned GM Steve Yzerman has made his team a legitimate contender to make the playoffs on a yearly basis. The next step is actually getting in and making something happen.

The Red Wings have steadily made progress, but there is still a lot of work for them to do. They have two lines that are capable of producing scads of offense, and, as was the case late in the season when Patrick Kane had a five-point game, they can be explosive. Yet the Wings still found themselves near the bottom third of the league in offense, made worse by the fact they were also in the same spot when it came to keeping goals out of their net. The Wings had just two regulars on the plus side of the ledger, and their goal differential was one of the worst among teams vying for a playoff spot.

The Wings' talent level has manifested itself into what has become a deadly power play, with Lucas Raymond, who plays the left point with the extra man, sitting among the top players in the NHL in power-play points. With the likes of Kane, Dylan Larkin and Alex DeBrincat up front, the Red Wings have a "Made in the USA" group that makes teams regret taking penalties. But even that is blunted by the fact that the Wings were the worst team in the NHL on the penalty kill. And just to be clear, that's not the worst among teams competing for a playoff spot, it's dead-last in the entire NHL. As good as the Red Wings have been while a man up, they've been downright awful at 5-on-5, where they had the fourth-fewest goals in the league.

In goal, Detroit is placing an awful lot of faith in veterans Cam Talbot and Petr Mrazek, neither of whom has been overly impressive. **– KEN CAMPBELL**

DYLAN **LARKIN**

BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

THE X-FACTOR

Patrick Kane is not the heartbreaking game-changer he once was, but the hockey world is well aware of his penchant for shining brightest when the games take on greater importance. Kane has only had one post-season appearance in the past four years, a fairly undistinguished effort with the New York Rangers. If you discount the qualifying round in the 2020 playoff bubble, Kane hasn't been out of the first round in more than a decade, but even in lean years, he's been at least about a point-per-game player in the Cup tournament. If muscle memory counts, he might have a couple more big goals in him.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Lucas Raymond	1. Dylan Larkin	1. Alex DeBrincat
2. Marco Kasper	2. J.T. Compher	2. Patrick Kane
3. Vladimir Tarasenko	3. Andrew Copp ⊞	3. Elmer Soderblom
4. Tyler Motte	4. Michael Rasmussen	4. Jonatan Berggren
5. Dominik Shine	5. Craig Smith	5. Carter Mazur ✚

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Moritz Seider	5. Erik Gustafsson	1. Cam Talbot
2. Ben Chiarot	6. Albert Johansson	2. Petr Mrazek
3. Simon Edvinsson	7. Justin Holl	3. Alex Lyon
4. Jeff Petry ✚	8. William Lagesson	✚ INJURED ⊞ LTIR

F1RST CUP PASS

An injury robbed **JEFF PETRY** of the chance to hit the 1,000-game mark this season. He should be back for the playoffs and undeniably deserves to get the Cup after Dylan Larkin.

FANTASY ZONE

This will be the first playoff appearance for many members of the Wings' young core, so they'll be leaning on **PATRICK KANE**. The second-highest American-born scorer of all-time, Kane, 36, continues to defy aging curves and had an impressive regular season. He's always been clutch in the playoffs; he's a three-time Stanley Cup champion and won the Conn Smythe Trophy in 2013.

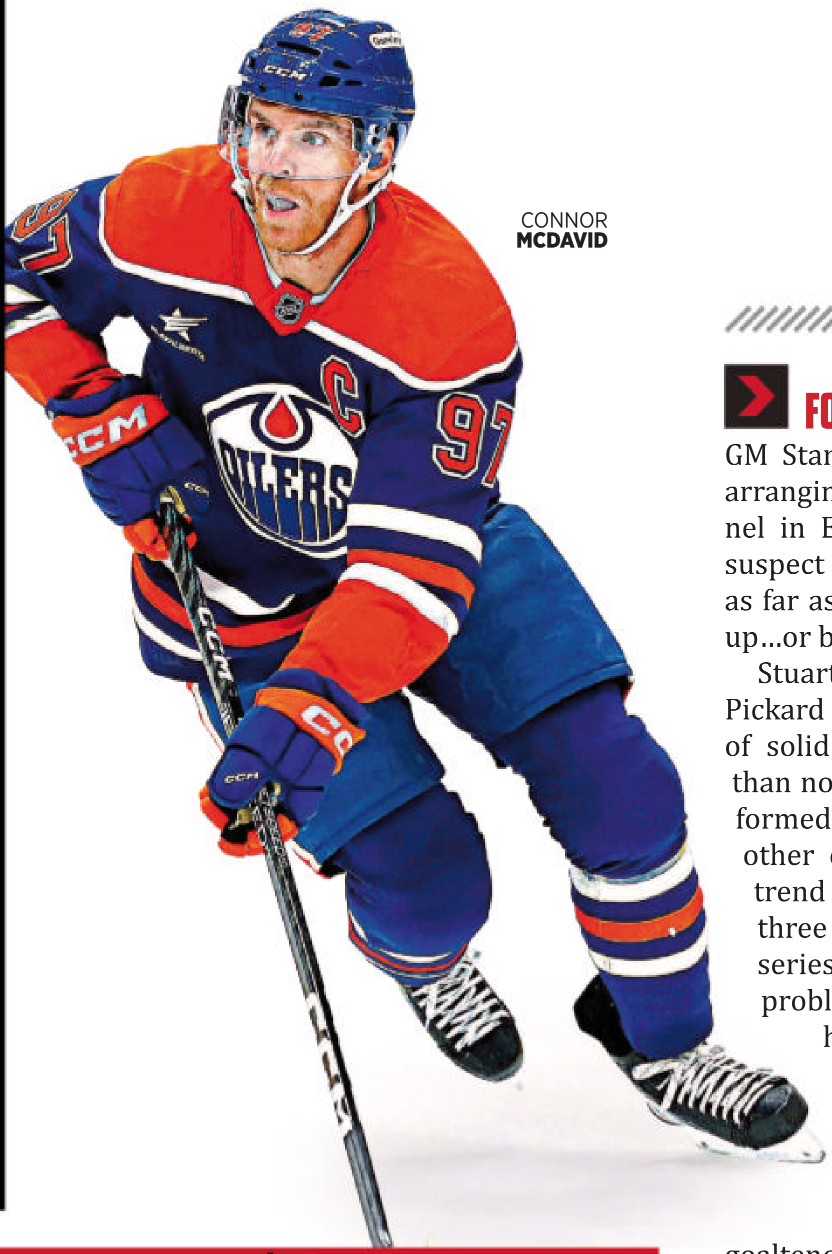
	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Dylan Larkin	65	27	32	59	24	0.91	5	1	0	1	0	0.20	★★★
Lucas Raymond	65	22	46	68	32	1.05	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★★
Moritz Seider	65	7	31	38	20	0.58	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Patrick Kane	55	17	28	45	23	0.82	143	53	85	138	44	0.97	★★
Alex DeBrincat	65	30	27	57	26	0.88	9	2	4	6	1	0.67	★★
Marco Kasper	60	12	14	26	4	0.43	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
J.T. Compher	59	7	18	25	8	0.42	70	14	15	29	4	0.41	★
Vladimir Tarasenko	63	9	17	26	7	0.41	121	49	24	73	25	0.60	★
Jonatan Berggren	61	10	9	19	5	0.31	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Simon Edvinsson	61	7	18	25	0	0.41	-	-	-	-	-	-	★

GOALIE	**W-L-OT**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	**W-L**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	
Cam Talbot	17-15-3	2	2.96	.901	16-18	6	2.75	.915	★
Petr Mrazek	12-20-2	1	3.33	.892	12-15	5	2.43	.911	★

EDMONTON OILERS

THE X-FACTOR

It will likely take another Conn Smythe Trophy-caliber effort by Connor McDavid for the Oilers to make it back to the Stanley Cup final. And as we recently watched on the 4 Nations stage, McDavid can rise to the occasion in clutch moments. Whether it's scoring a timely goal or simply going into beast mode and dominating play in the offensive zone, McDavid can reach another level when he needs it. That's always the X-factor in Edmonton. But he can't do it alone. If Leon Draisaitl and other members of the Oilers' supporting cast maintain good health this spring, McDavid won't have to shoulder it all.


CONNOR **MCDAVID**

FOR AS MUCH work as GM Stan Bowman does in rearranging the support personnel in Edmonton's lineup, we suspect the Oilers will only go as far as the goaltending holds up…or breaks down.

Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard have had stretches of solid play, but more often than not, they've been outperformed by the stopper at the other end of the ice. If that trend continues over two or three or four post-season series in the spring, there's a problem afoot: Edmonton's highly skilled superstars will have to be at their very, very best to compensate for the sometimes sketchy play of the goaltending. It's that blunt.

Edmonton's offense and power play are no longer best in class, but they're in the top 10. Down seasons from Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins along with negligible contributions from Jeff Skinner, Viktor Arvidsson, Vasily Podkolzin and Adam Henrique explain the decline. But any time Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl step on the ice, a scoring opportunity is right around the corner. The late-season additions of Trent Frederic and Max Jones boost the bottom half of the lineup, while the return of Evander Kane from season-long injury would be a bonus.

The Oilers can be beaten when the defense breaks down or gets lackadaisical. Just watch a video package of Evan Bouchard lowlights. The additions of John Klingberg and minute-muncher Jake Walman – he's in the top 40 in the league at 23:12, if you can believe it – will lighten the load on Edmonton's beleaguered defenders.

But it will surely come down to how Skinner performs. If he can at least provide league-average numbers, the Oilers have a chance to get back to the Cup final. If he's often spelled by Pickard, then something bad has happened. **– BRIAN COSTELLO**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Ryan Nugent-Hopkins	1. Connor McDavid	1. Zach Hyman
2. Evander Kane ✚	2. Leon Draisaitl	2. Viktor Arvidsson
3. Vasily Podkolzin	3. Adam Henrique	3. Connor Brown
4. Trent Frederic ✚	4. Mattias Janmark	4. Corey Perry
5. Jeff Skinner	5. Kasperi Kapanen	5. Max Jones

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Evan Bouchard	5. Brett Kulak	1. Stuart Skinner
2. Mattias Ekholm	6. Ty Emberson	2. Calvin Pickard
3. Darnell Nurse	7. John Klingberg	3. Olivier Rodrigue
4. Jake Walman	8. Troy Stecher	

✚ INJURED

F1RST CUP PASS

Connor McDavid is the very best at setting up super sniper **LEON DRAISAITL** for a one-timer. Except this pass will be telegraphed, deliberate and forever joyous.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Connor McDavid	59	24	60	84	29	1.42	74	37	80	117	47	1.58	★★★★★
Leon Draisaitl	65	47	51	98	30	1.51	74	41	67	108	43	1.46	★★★★★
Evan Bouchard	65	13	39	52	21	0.80	53	13	45	58	32	1.09	★★★★
Zach Hyman	60	22	15	37	11	0.62	85	35	27	62	17	0.73	★★★
Ryan Nugent-Hopkins	64	16	23	39	17	0.61	74	17	44	61	31	0.82	★★★
Mattias Ekholm	60	8	19	27	6	0.45	112	12	40	52	9	0.46	★★★
Darnell Nurse	60	5	19	24	1	0.40	72	4	17	21	2	0.29	★★
Jake Walman	53	6	28	34	7	0.64	1	0	0	0	0	0.00	★★
Viktor Arvidsson	50	8	12	20	2	0.40	72	13	24	37	8	0.71	★★
Evander Kane ✚	-	-	-	-	-	-	76	26	17	43	8	0.57	★

GOALIE	**W-L-OT**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	**W-L**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	
Stuart Skinner	22-17-4	2	2.88	.896	19-15	1	2.83	.894	★★★
Calvin Pickard	15-7-0	0	2.76	.896	1-1	0	2.21	.915	★

FANTASY ZONE

No team's playoff hopes will hinge on goaltending as much as the Oilers' with **STUART SKINNER**. He ranked 13th in save percentage among 27 goalies who made an appearance in last season's playoffs, and he allowed nine goals in the first three games of the Stanley Cup final. The Oilers do not have a better option in goal, so, for better or for worse, Skinner will likely be in net.

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

FLORIDA PANTHERS

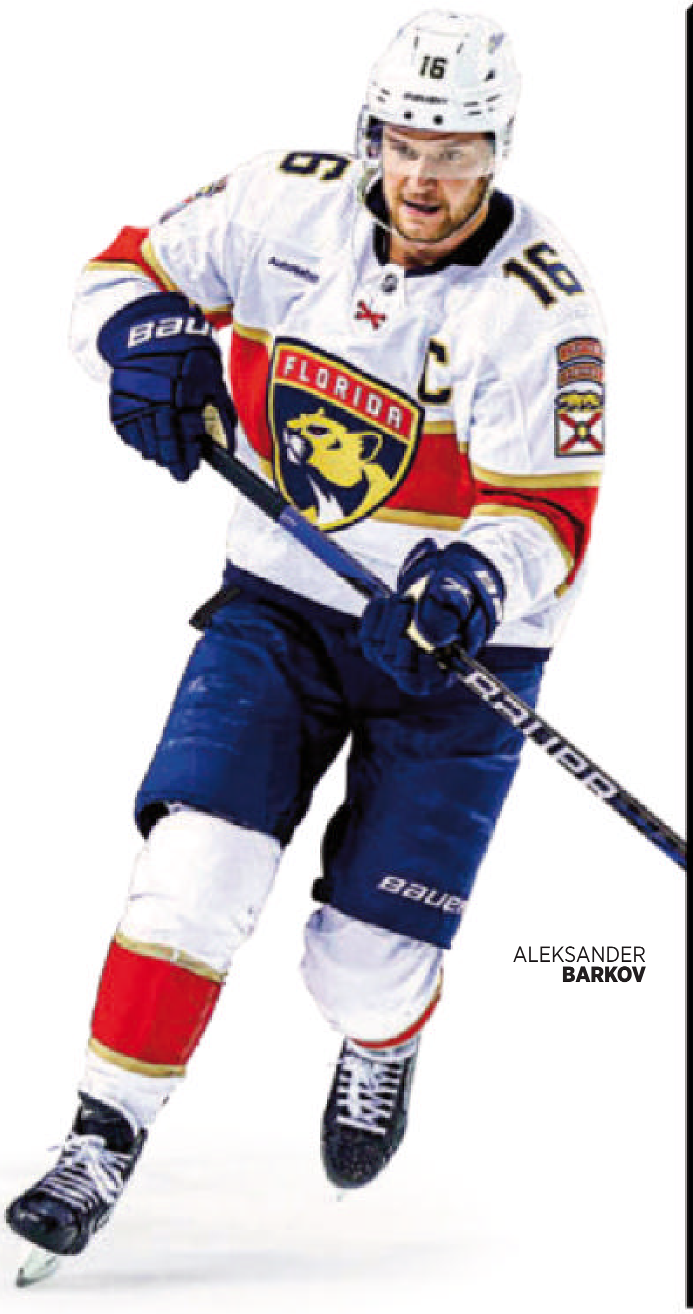
GETTING TO THE Stanley Cup final is really difficult. Just ask the 2022-23 Florida Panthers. Winning the thing is even more daunting. Consult the 2023-24 Panthers. And repeating? Well, in a few months, the 2024-25 Panthers may have the battle scars to show how improbable that is, too.

In part because of their fine season and partly because of the trades made by GM Bill Zito at the deadline, the Panthers enter this post-season as the favorites to emerge from the East. Not only have they been there and experienced both sides of the equation, but they're also a large, mean, scary bunch who epitomize "big-boy hockey."

And with the surprise acquisitions of defenseman Seth Jones and winger Brad Marchand, the Panthers have incorporated a couple of big-time players who are starved for Stanley, thereby eliminating the possibility of complacency setting in.

Even though Sam Reinhart won't come anywhere near the 57 goals he scored last season and might be the only Panther to hit the 80-point mark, the Panthers were actually scoring at a slightly higher pace than they were in 2023-24. They shoot the puck *a lot*, and while they're not as tight as they were last year defensively, when they lost the Jennings Trophy by one goal, they were still a top-10 team in that part of the game. Facing a steady diet of Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Bennett and Marchand could be enough to give any team the desire to exit the playoffs quickly.

Even with the addition of Jones, the Panthers are still not as deep on defense as they were last season, and the same goes for the bottom half of their forward group. Some of their key players, Tkachuk in particular, have had to deal with significant injuries. Playing life-and-death games late into the spring in successive years is bound to take its toll on key players, regardless of the reinforcements. **– KEN CAMPBELL**



ALEKSANDER **BARKOV**

THE X-FACTOR

If the Panthers get to the Eastern Conference final and Brad Marchand plays in half of the Panthers' playoff games, the conditional pick going Boston's way goes from a second-rounder in 2027 to a first-rounder in 2027 or 2028. So there is clearly some uncertainty about whether or not Marchand will be healthy enough to contribute. If he is, however, he gives a Panthers team with a ton of character, grit and pugnacity even more of all three. It was a long time ago and Marchand had just turned 23 when he won his only Stanley Cup in 2011, and this represents perhaps his last chance to add another.

F1RST CUP PASS

On a roster filled with players who already have Cup rings, **NATE SCHMIDT** is one without. He's 33 and came close with Vegas in 2018. His hands will undoubtedly be at the ready.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Carter Verhaeghe	1. Aleksander Barkov	1. Matthew Tkachuk ✚
2. Brad Marchand	2. Sam Bennett	2. Sam Reinhart
3. Mackie Samoskevich	3. Anton Lundell	3. Evan Rodrigues
4. Eetu Luostarinen	4. Nico Sturm	4. Jesper Boqvist
5. A.J. Greer	5. Tomas Nosek	5. Jonah Gadjovich

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Gustav Forsling	5. Dmitry Kulikov	1. Sergei Bobrovsky
2. Aaron Ekblad ⊘	6. Nate Schmidt	2. Vitek Vanecek
3. Seth Jones	7. Uvis Balinskis	3. Kaapo Kahkonen
4. Niko Mikkola	8. Tobias Bjornfot	

✚ INJURED ⊘ SUSPENDED

FANTASY ZONE

The Panthers made a last-minute shocking trade at the deadline, acquiring **BRAD MARCHAND** from the rival Bruins. He's been incredible in the playoffs with 138 points in 157 career games, and he ranks seventh in total playoff points over the past decade. A line with Marchand, Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Bennett would be one of the nastiest units we've seen in a very long time.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Aleksander Barkov	56	17	43	60	24	1.07	71	19	40	59	18	0.83	★★★★★
Sam Reinhart	66	32	38	70	25	1.06	55	21	12	33	11	0.60	★★★★★
Matthew Tkachuk ✚	52	22	35	57	23	1.10	71	24	37	61	19	0.86	★★★★★
Carter Verhaeghe	66	17	28	45	16	0.68	69	26	29	55	7	0.80	★★★
Sam Bennett	64	22	22	44	9	0.69	84	25	31	56	17	0.67	★★★
Anton Lundell	65	15	26	41	6	0.63	54	6	22	28	5	0.52	★★★
Brad Marchand	61	21	26	47	13	0.77	157	56	82	138	48	0.88	★★★
Aaron Ekblad ⊘	56	3	30	33	11	0.59	64	4	16	20	4	0.31	★★★
Seth Jones	47	7	21	28	16	0.60	37	5	19	24	12	0.65	★★
Mackie Samoskevich	59	13	12	25	8	0.42	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Sergei Bobrovsky	28-14-2		4	2.49		.907	45-43		3	2.85		.905	★★★★★
Vitek Vanecek	4-10-3		1	3.66		.886	2-4		0	4.52		.834	★

SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

LOS ANGELES KINGS

LOS ANGELES KNOWS the road to Stanley Cup success literally runs through Edmonton. The Kings have lost three consecutive first-round playoff series to the Oilers, and they're fairly certain another springtime matchup is on the horizon, whether it's in the first or second round.

To that end, the Kings beefed up their blueline with the off-season acquisition of Joel Edmundson to make life harder for Edmonton's skilled forwards. Drew Doughty missed the first 47 games of the season and will likely have found the fine balance between being rested and in mid-season form. And goalie Darcy Kuemper has regained his stellar form since coming over from Washington. He was tied for second in save percentage among goalies with at least 30 starts.

Even if things seem more solid on the defensive side, the Kings can never match the Oilers blow for blow on offense. L.A. does have better balance among its forwards, though. Eight Kings average at least 0.5 points per game versus just four for Edmonton. If the Kings are going to outscore the Oilers in a long series, it will have to be by committee. Can a million nicks and cuts overcome the knockout potential of Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl? That's the challenge again.

One thing working in the Kings' favor is their ability to suppress shots. Their average of 25.6 shots against per game was tied for the third-lowest in the past 10 NHL seasons. That speaks to a disciplined lineup.

Where the Kings struggle is when they fall behind and start chasing. They don't have the horses to win track meets. In games in which L.A. trailed after the first period, they came back to win just twice. That's tied for second-worst in the NHL. And the Kings' power play is the worst among teams that have locked down a playoff spot. **– BRIAN COSTELLO**

THE X-FACTOR

The Kings are going to the post-season with a fourth different goaltending tandem in four seasons. Jonathan Quick won three of seven games against Edmonton with a .904 SP in 2022. Joonas Korpisalo had an .892 SP in the six-game loss to the Oilers in 2023. And Cam Talbot and David Rittich combined for an .864 SP in the five-game loss to Edmonton last year. Darcy Kuemper will do the heavy lifting this spring (Rittich is No. 2), and it's an understatement to say he's going to have to outperform the others. Kuemper's .930 SP in two games versus the Oilers earlier this season is a good sign.

ANZE **KOPITAR**

DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Kevin Fiala	**1.** Anze Kopitar	**1.** Adrian Kempe
2. Andrei Kuzmenko	**2.** Quinton Byfield	**2.** Alex Laferriere
3. Warren Foegele	**3.** Phillip Danault	**3.** Trevor Moore
4. Tanner Jeannot	**4.** Trevor Lewis	**4.** Alex Turcotte
5. Andre Lee	**5.** Samuel Helenius	**5.** Akil Thomas
DEFENSE		**GOALIE**
1. Drew Doughty	**5.** Jordan Spence	**1.** Darcy Kuemper
2. Mikey Anderson	**6.** Brandt Clarke	**2.** David Rittich
3. Vladislav Gavrikov	**7.** Jacob Moverare	**3.** Pheonix Copley
4. Joel Edmundson	**8.** Kyle Burroughs	

FIRST CUP PASS

Does Anze Kopitar to **DREW DOUGHTY** ring a bell? It happened in 2012 and 2014 when they were in their mid-20s. There will be more grey in the beards this time.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Anze Kopitar	64	16	37	53	17	0.83	97	25	55	80	26	0.82	★★
Adrian Kempe	64	27	26	53	10	0.83	22	11	8	19	6	0.86	★★
Kevin Fiala	63	25	19	44	17	0.70	43	11	12	23	9	0.53	★★
Drew Doughty	16	2	6	8	3	0.50	95	18	39	57	27	0.60	★★
Quinton Byfield	64	16	23	39	3	0.61	13	1	7	8	1	0.62	★★
Alex Laferriere	60	15	17	32	4	0.53	5	1	1	2	0	0.40	★
Warren Foegele	64	19	18	37	0	0.58	80	12	12	24	1	0.30	★
Phillip Danault	63	6	28	34	0	0.54	56	7	13	20	3	0.36	★
Trevor Moore	55	13	17	30	2	0.55	25	5	5	10	1	0.40	★
Brandt Clarke	61	5	23	28	7	0.46	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Darcy Kuemper	21-8-7		3	2.23		.917	17-10		2	2.72		.908	★★
David Rittich	13-12-2		0	2.75		.887	0-4		0	5.24		.787	★

FANTASY ZONE

Last season was a big breakout campaign for **QUINTON BYFIELD**, and the Kings are looking for him to take yet another step this time around. They're desperate for scoring and counting on Byfield to deliver. He will surely see a significant increase in both ice time and production after averaging 16 minutes per night and scoring zero goals in five playoff games last spring.

POWER RANKING | 13TH

MINNESOTA WILD

MARC-ANDRE
FLEURY

AFTER THE WILD began 2024-25 in contention for top spot in the West, their early success gave way to a much more volatile period. From the end of a five-game winning streak on Dec. 7 through the trade deadline on March 7, the Wild had a .486 points percentage – the result of the NHL's second-lowest goals and eighth-worst goals against per game rates over that span.

It's impossible to ignore, however, that Minnesota has been forced to battle through significant injury issues. The Wild have been without Kirill Kaprizov, Joel Eriksson Ek, Jared Spurgeon and Jonas Brodin for extended periods. The only silver lining – as thin as it may be – is that those absences opened the doors for others to prove they can shoulder the load. At varying points, defenders Jake Middleton, Declan Chisholm and Zach Bogosian as well as middle-six forwards Frederick Gaudreau and Marcus Johansson have done admirable work filling in. That should give the Wild confidence in their depth.

After a decent rookie year, Marco Rossi has been a revelation, often centering the top line and scoring at nearly a 70-point pace. Add Matt Boldy to the equation and the Wild have shown the ability to put points on the board.

If this season has made one thing clear to the Wild, though, it's just how reliant the team's hopes are on goaltending. Last year, when neither Filip Gustavsson nor Marc-Andre Fleury managed a save percentage above .900, Minnesota finished 11 points out of a playoff spot. But Gustavsson has been exceptional this year, posting Vezina-worthy stats without the record to go along with it. If he can continue that into the playoffs, there's no reason the Wild can't play spoiler. And there'll be the added motivation to send the lovable Fleury off with his fourth career Stanley Cup. **– JARED CLINTON**

THE X-FACTOR

Assuming he's healthy when the time comes, which version of Kirill Kaprizov shows up in the post-season: the one who scored seven goals in six games against St. Louis in 2022 or the one who was nearly shut out completely, posting one point, in 2023? There's a lot riding on the three-time 40-goal scorer's shoulders, and not without reason. While others have proven capable of powering Minnesota's victories, Kaprizov has within him the power to be a legitimate game-breaker. That is, after all, the very reason he received Hart Trophy consideration in each of his first three NHL campaigns.

F1RST CUP PASS

The perfect send-off for Marc-Andre Fleury? Sure. But maybe the three-time Cup champion can defer, giving 37-year-old **MATS ZUCCARELLO** his very first twirl with Lord Stanley.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Kirill Kaprizov ✚	**1.** Joel Eriksson Ek ✚	**1.** Mats Zuccarello
2. Matt Boldy	**2.** Marco Rossi	**2.** Gustav Nyquist
3. Marcus Johansson	**3.** Ryan Hartman	**3.** Vinnie Hinostroza
4. Marcus Foligno	**4.** Frederick Gaudreau	**4.** Justin Brazeau
5. Yakov Trenin	**5.** Devin Shore	**5.** Brendan Gaunce

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Brock Faber	**5.** Declan Chisholm	**1.** Filip Gustavsson
2. Jonas Brodin ✚	**6.** Zach Bogosian	**2.** Marc-Andre Fleury
3. Jared Spurgeon	**7.** Jon Merrill	**3.** Jesper Wallstedt
4. Jake Middleton	**8.** David Jiricek	✚ INJURED

FANTASY ZONE

KIRILL KAPRIZOV was having an MVP-caliber season before a lower-body injury that required surgery in January forced him to miss half the year. His previous playoff performance – one goal in six games – left a lot to be desired, but no one else in the lineup is capable of generating elite offense like he does. In five seasons with the Wild, Kaprizov already ranks fourth all-time in goals.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Kirill Kaprizov	37	23	29	52	12	1.41	19	10	2	12	5	0.63	★★★
Matt Boldy	66	21	34	55	17	0.83	12	1	3	4	2	0.33	★★
Marco Rossi	66	21	32	53	13	0.80	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Mats Zuccarello	53	15	26	41	11	0.77	96	18	37	55	19	0.57	★★
Joel Eriksson Ek	42	9	15	24	8	0.57	26	6	4	10	1	0.38	★★
Gustav Nyquist	63	9	13	22	2	0.35	77	6	24	30	3	0.39	★
Frederick Gaudreau	66	15	15	30	4	0.45	26	8	2	10	2	0.38	★
Brock Faber	62	7	17	24	10	0.39	6	0	0	0	0	0.00	★
Jared Spurgeon	51	7	19	26	8	0.51	67	8	21	29	15	0.43	★
Marcus Foligno	66	11	11	22	0	0.33	28	2	5	7	1	0.25	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Filip Gustavsson	25-14-4		4	2.57		.915	2-3		0	2.33		.921	★★
Marc-Andre Fleury	12-8-1		1	2.72		.904	92-74		16	2.56		.911	★

NICK WOSIKA-IMAGN IMAGES

MONTREAL CANADIENS

THE X-FACTOR

Defenseman Kaiden Guhle suffered a rather horrific lacerated quadricep in late January that had him out of the lineup indefinitely, but the 2020 first-round pick was back on skates by early March, which gave the Canadiens reason to believe he might be able to return this season. Montreal would love to have the 23-year-old back in the lineup, but not at the expense of his long-term health. If the playoff push is alive, there's a chance he'll be back late in the season, but if not, he'll be shut down. Adding Guhle to the blueline would make the defense corps significantly better in all areas of the ice.

COLE CAUFIELD

THE DAYS OF the Stanley Cup parade following "the usual route" left Montreal a long time ago. But three years into a complete rebuild, the Canadiens are showing definitive signs of progress, the most prominent of which is that they were playing meaningful games in the final stretch. And, really, nobody saw that coming before the season began.

Under coach Martin St-Louis, the Canadiens have markedly improved in several key areas in 2024-25. The power play, which was bordering on generationally bad, is much better this season. And if you think the arrival of rookie defenseman Lane Hutson and the acquisition of Patrik Laine and the improved play with the extra man is coincidental, you haven't been watching this team much. Between the two of them, with Hutson's puck-moving and dangling abilities and Laine's deadly one-timer, the Canadiens are getting more production from the back end of their power play than they've seen in years.

And the penalty kill, which was in the bottom third of the league in 2023-24, is now in the top third. You can thank the rebirth of Joel Armia and the career year of Jake Evans for that improvement.

But the Canadiens still give up way too many chances and goals. The difference between shots for and against was among the worst among teams that were in a playoff position, as was their goal differential. And even though their goals-against average was much better than last season, it was still seventh-worst in the NHL.

One constant this year has been the play of Montreal's top line, which features captain Nick Suzuki flanked by Cole Caufield and Juraj Slafkovsky. Suzuki and Caufield, in particular, have been dynamic together, and Slafkovsky continues to adjust better to his role of creating space and being another offensive option. **– KEN CAMPBELL**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Juraj Slafkovsky	**1.** Nick Suzuki	**1.** Cole Caufield
2. Alex Newhook	**2.** Kirby Dach ✚	**2.** Patrik Laine
3. Josh Anderson	**3.** Christian Dvorak	**3.** Brendan Gallagher
4. Emil Heineman	**4.** Jake Evans	**4.** Joel Armia
5. Michael Pezzetta	**5.** Owen Beck	**5.** Joshua Roy

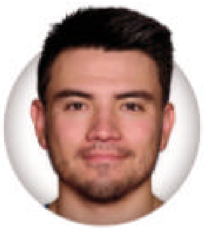
DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Mike Matheson	**5.** David Savard	**1.** Sam Montembeault
2. Lane Hutson	**6.** Arber Xhekaj	**2.** Jakub Dobes
3. Alexandre Carrier	**7.** Jayden Struble	**3.** Cayden Primeau
4. Kaiden Guhle 🟥	**8.** Logan Mailloux	

🟥 INJURED ✚ LTIR

FIRST CUP PASS

Ten-year veteran D-man **MIKE MATHESON** played for the Panthers before they were good and the Penguins after they were good. He's a local guy and has been a stalwart.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Nick Suzuki	66	20	49	69	23	1.05	32	11	12	23	8	0.72	★★
Cole Caufield	66	33	28	61	16	0.92	20	4	8	12	3	0.60	★★
Lane Hutson	66	4	48	52	23	0.79	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Juraj Slafkovsky	63	14	27	41	8	0.65	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Mike Matheson	64	6	23	29	10	0.45	20	1	6	7	2	0.35	★
Patrik Laine	36	16	11	27	17	0.75	24	8	8	16	8	0.67	★
Joel Armia	65	11	14	25	3	0.38	44	10	5	15	1	0.34	★
Brendan Gallagher	66	15	10	25	6	0.38	71	13	18	31	8	0.44	★
Jake Evans	66	12	17	29	0	0.44	13	1	2	3	0	0.23	★
Alex Newhook	66	13	9	22	4	0.33	27	1	6	7	1	0.26	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**		**GAA**	**SP**	
Sam Montembeault	24-21-4		4	2.83		.901	-		-		-	-	★★
Jakub Dobes	6-3-2		1	2.71		.907	-		-		-	-	★



FANTASY ZONE

A lot has changed in the four seasons since Montreal made a surprise appearance in the Stanley Cup final, but one thing has remained constant: **NICK SUZUKI** is still the No. 1 center. He's one of just six players remaining from that team, and he's now the captain. During the 2021 run, he averaged a team-best 0.73 points per playoff game and led the Habs in even-strength and PP points.

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

NEW JERSEY DEVILS

NICO **HISCHIER**

THE 2024-25 REGULAR season was going a lot more smoothly for the Devils than the previous campaign, as this edition wasn't dragged down by debilitating injuries to star players such as Jack Hughes and Dougie Hamilton – until both Hughes and Hamilton got hurt right before the trade deadline. Hughes was the bigger loss, as shoulder surgery ruled him out for the rest of the season, including the playoffs. How New Jersey will fare without its top-line center will be one of the defining questions of the opening round.

The Devils are great at keeping the puck out of their net, with one of the best defenses in the NHL. They're not bad at scoring – basically middle-of-the-pack in goals per game – and their special teams are excellent. In Hughes and Nico Hischier, they had an enviable 1-2 punch down the middle, and, thanks in part to those two, New Jersey is one of the better possession teams in the league. Without Hughes, others must step up.

It's worth asking, however, why the Devils haven't been better overall. New Jersey came into the season looking like a Stanley Cup contender thanks to its improved health and the additions of goalie Jacob Markstrom and shutdown blueliner Brett Pesce. But the Devils' record has just been OK, and if you look at the types of teams that have been successful in the playoffs lately, the Devils don't fit the mold. Their top three scorers (Hughes, Hischier and Jesper Bratt) are excellent but also light – at about 175 pounds each. Their coach is Sheldon Keefe, who has won a Calder Cup with the Toronto Marlies but otherwise has only won a single playoff round in his NHL career. Not to mention, the Devils also lost defenseman Jonas Siegenthaler for the season due to injury, but they did add Brian Dumoulin at the deadline. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

THE X-FACTOR

At 6-foot-6 and 207 pounds, Jacob Markstrom has great size for a goaltender, and he uses it to his advantage. He's 35, but you only need to look to 2024 Cup-champion starter Sergei Bobrovsky to know that goalies age differently. Incredibly, however, Markstrom has only played in the post-season twice before – with Vancouver in 2020 and Calgary in 2022. Though he won at least a round each time, his second round against the Oilers in 2022 was awful, and some wondered if it left a psychic wound. But if a healthy Markstrom is on top of his game, the Devils will be in good hands.

F1RST CUP PASS

The Devils don't have any Ray Bourque types on one last ride, but big blueliner **DOUGIE HAMILTON** is a 13-year veteran who will be crucial to New Jersey's success.

DEPTH CHART | 2024–25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Jesper Bratt	1. Jack Hughes ⊞	1. Timo Meier
2. Erik Haula	2. Nico Hischier	2. Dawson Mercer
3. Ondrej Palat	3. Cody Glass	3. Stefan Noesen
4. Tomas Tatar	4. Paul Cotter	4. Nathan Bastian
5. Kurtis MacDermid	5. Curtis Lazar	5. Daniel Sprong

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Brett Pesce	5. Brian Dumoulin	1. Jacob Markstrom
2. Luke Hughes	6. Jonas Siegenthaler ⊞	2. Jake Allen
3. Dougie Hamilton ✚	7. Brenden Dillon	3. Nico Daws
4. Johnathan Kovacevic	8. Simon Nemec	

✚ INJURED ⊞ LTIR

FANTASY ZONE

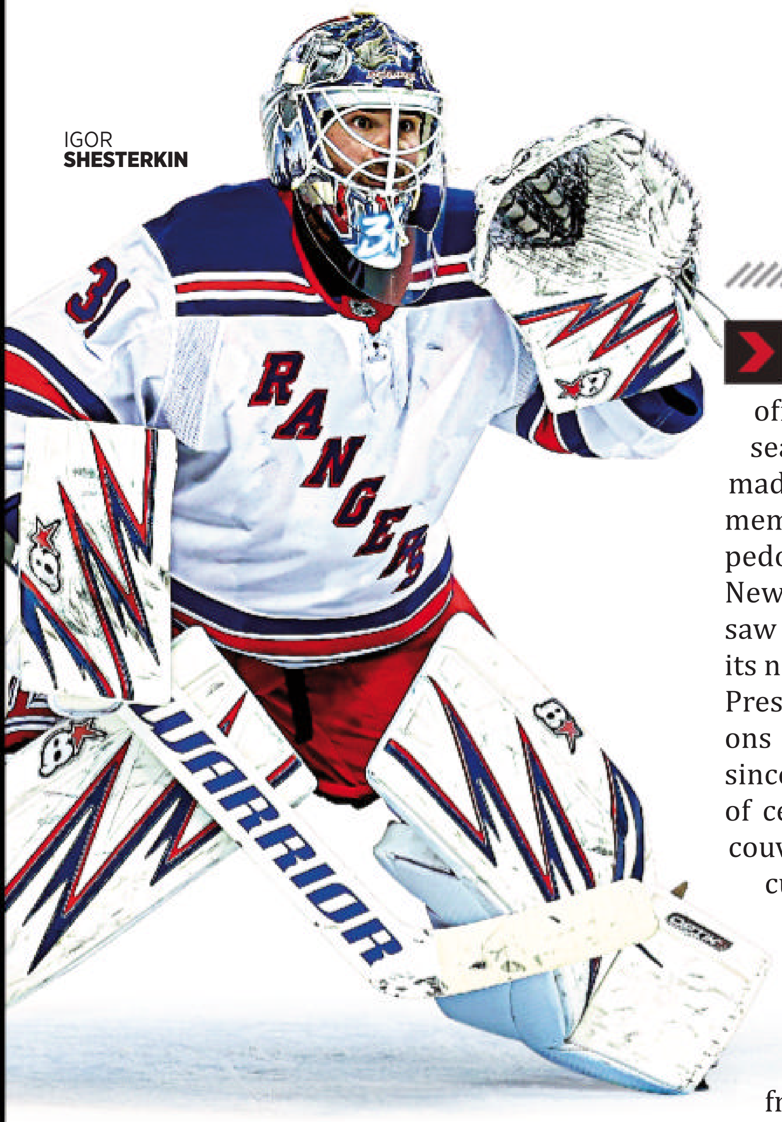
The Devils must now turn to **JESPER BRATT** to do the bulk of their scoring following a season-ending shoulder injury to Jack Hughes. Coming off his fourth consecutive 70-point campaign, Bratt is now in the spotlight. He only scored one goal in 12 games during New Jersey's last playoff run, good for a shooting percentage of just four percent. He'll be better this time around.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Jesper Bratt	67	19	57	76	28	1.13	13	1	5	6	2	0.46	★★★★
Nico Hischier	61	27	24	51	22	0.84	17	2	6	8	1	0.47	★★★★
Timo Meier	66	18	25	43	9	0.65	46	9	15	24	5	0.52	★★★
Stefan Noesen	65	19	15	34	14	0.52	30	9	4	13	6	0.43	★★
Dawson Mercer	67	15	13	28	4	0.42	12	3	4	7	2	0.58	★★
Luke Hughes	58	6	25	31	9	0.53	3	0	2	2	1	0.67	★★
Dougie Hamilton ✚	63	9	31	40	15	0.63	66	9	20	29	12	0.44	★
Ondrej Palat	65	13	12	25	4	0.38	150	51	50	101	20	0.67	★
Tomas Tatar	61	6	9	15	3	0.25	52	7	6	13	3	0.25	★
Paul Cotter	66	14	6	20	0	0.30	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Jacob Markstrom	22-12-5		3	2.36		.906	13-13		2	2.90		.911	★★★★
Jake Allen	11-13-1		4	2.60		.911	11-12		0	2.06		.924	★

DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

THE X-FACTOR

In recent years, J.T. Miller has been a gamer in the playoffs – when his team has made it in. The passionate center has only seen his team qualify twice in the past five seasons, but he had 30 points in 30 playoff games during that span. Should New York snatch a spot in the post-season, Miller will be a driver for a team that needs his type of energy – not to mention his skill. The only question is whether the mad dash to simply qualify for the dance will drain the team at the starting line or propel them forward. Look for Miller to be an emotional leader, just like he was in Vancouver's past two runs.



IGOR **SHESTERKIN**

NEW YORK RANGERS

THE RANGERS WERE off to a good start to the season until GM Chris Drury made his late-November trade memo, which infamously torpedoed the squad, sending New York into a tailspin that saw the club win just six of its next 20 games. The reigning Presidents' Trophy champions haven't seemed the same since, though the acquisition of center J.T. Miller from Vancouver was a victory in the culture department.

The positives for New York are obvious: the Rangers feature some of the most talented, high-end names in the game, from scoring winger Artemi Panarin to catalyst defenseman Adam Fox and superstar netminder Igor Shesterkin. Difference-makers are present at all positions. Whether the Rangers have the depth for a run is another question. Trading away Ryan Lindgren and Jimmy Vesey to Colorado and Reilly Smith to Vegas indicates that Drury was covering his bases by looking to the future.

On top of everything else, key injuries have hampered New York, leaving both the team's offense and defense in the middle of the pack. The power play was a bottom-10 unit, but the penalty kill has been one of the NHL's best. As was the case in previous years, the Rangers are a weak possession squad, though in the past, they've papered over that with Shesterkin's ace goaltending.

While this has been a terrible year for the franchise, there's enough talent on the team for another long run. Getting into the dance may actually be harder than succeeding in the playoffs, as a hot Rangers team wouldn't be a fun foe for a higher seed to contend with in the first round. And if they find their footing, with Shesterkin in net and a solid cast in front of him, watch out – the Rangers were considered a contender heading into the campaign for a reason. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Artemi Panarin	**1.** Vincent Trocheck	**1.** Alexis Lafreniere
2. Chris Kreider	**2.** J.T. Miller	**2.** Mika Zibanejad
3. Will Cuylle	**3.** Sam Carrick	**3.** Brett Berard
4. Adam Edstrom ✚	**4.** Jonny Brodzinski	**4.** Matt Rempe
5. Brennan Othmann	**5.** Juuso Parssinen	**5.** Arthur Kaliyev

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Adam Fox ✚	**5.** Urho Vaakanainen	**1.** Igor Shesterkin
2. K'Andre Miller	**6.** Zac Jones	**2.** Jonathan Quick
3. Will Borgen	**7.** Carson Soucy	**3.** Louis Domingue
4. Braden Schneider	**8.** Calvin de Haan	

✚ INJURED

FIRST CUP PASS

With former captain Jacob Trouba in Anaheim, the Rangers need to think about who will claim the Cup first, and career Blueshirt **CHRIS KREIDER** would be a great pick.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Artemi Panarin	64	28	41	69	22	1.08	73	21	40	61	27	0.84	★★★
Adam Fox ✚	58	5	43	48	16	0.83	46	5	34	39	19	0.85	★★★
J.T. Miller	56	16	36	52	20	0.93	91	12	44	56	18	0.62	★★
Mika Zibanejad	66	15	33	48	17	0.73	74	19	44	63	25	0.85	★★
Vincent Trocheck	66	18	25	43	10	0.65	56	17	20	37	14	0.66	★★
Alexis Lafreniere	66	14	22	36	4	0.55	43	10	13	23	5	0.53	★
Will Cuylle	66	17	18	35	3	0.53	16	1	1	2	0	0.13	★
Chris Kreider	52	18	4	22	7	0.42	123	48	28	76	26	0.62	★
K'Andre Miller	60	5	13	18	2	0.30	43	3	9	12	0	0.28	★
Zac Jones	36	1	10	11	1	0.31	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Igor Shesterkin	22-22-4		4	2.85		.906	23-20		0	2.41		.928	★★★
Jonathan Quick	9-6-2		3	3.14		.896	49-43		10	2.31		.921	★

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

FANTASY ZONE

In his first four playoff runs with the Rangers from 2014 to 2017, **J.T. MILLER** scored just one goal in 40 games and averaged 15 minutes per outing. He returns a more complete and mature player and as someone who's expected to carry a big offensive burden. In two playoff runs with the Canucks, Miller was a point-per-game player. Expect something similar with the Rangers.

OTTAWA SENATORS

EVER SINCE COACH Travis Green arrived in Ottawa, he has lived by the mantra, “Win the day.” He reckons that if you pile up enough days with W’s in a season, you’re going to be playing games when it matters. And with the Senators putting everything together and sitting firmly in a playoff spot late in the season for the first time in eight years, it’s a philosophy that has worked.

There is a lot to like about the young and gritty Senators, who are learning how to win after years of learning how to lose. It is indeed the result of a lot of painful lessons, but from captain Brady Tkachuk down, they’ve learned to retain their youthful enthusiasm and vigor and not allow it to spill over into a lack of focus. They are much better at managing games and holding late leads, thereby gathering points they used to leave on the table.

Perhaps the biggest stride the Senators have made has been in their defensive play. Last season, they were 28th in goals against, and they have been 20th or worse in the league in that department in each of the past seven seasons, dating back to the last time they made the playoffs. When all is said and done, they’ll likely be in the top 10 this year. And the more defensive responsibility Green has given to the likes of Shane Pinto, Ridly Greig and Mike Amadio, the more they’ve responded offensively.

The Sens are good at just about everything and fabulous at nothing...yet. Tim Stutzle is the only player on the roster who is among the NHL’s top 50 scorers, and in most important categories, they find themselves in the middle of the league. But, given their recent past, they’ll happily take that. And given their streakiness and proclivity for stringing together multiple wins in a row this season, they’re a team that no one wants to face come playoff time. **– KEN CAMPBELL**

TIM **STUTZLE**

THE X-FACTOR

GM Steve Staios was bold at the trade deadline, acquiring Dylan Cozens from Buffalo and Fabian Zetterlund from San Jose. Cozens gives them an interesting and much-needed dimension. Although his toughness was a little exaggerated by observers at the deadline, he definitely makes the Senators a more difficult opponent and less easy to push around. And he’ll take some of the pressure off Brady Tkachuk to both create offense and play the heavy game all the time. And like most of his Sens teammates, Cozens hasn’t been anywhere near the post-season in his career, so he will be hungry.

FIRST CUP PASS

If Brady Tkachuk doesn’t immediately hand the Cup to **CLAUDE GIROUX**, there should be a full-scale investigation. This might be the easiest pass to predict in the entire NHL.

DEPTH CHART | 2024–25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Brady Tkachuk	**1.** Tim Stutzle	**1.** Claude Giroux
2. Ridly Greig	**2.** Dylan Cozens	**2.** Drake Batherson
3. David Perron	**3.** Shane Pinto	**3.** Michael Amadio
4. Fabian Zetterlund	**4.** Adam Gaudette	**4.** Matthew Highmore
5. Nick Cousins 🟥	**5.** Zack MacEwen	**5.** Cole Reinhardt

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Jake Sanderson	**5.** Travis Hamonic	**1.** Linus Ullmark
2. Thomas Chabot	**6.** Tyler Kleven	**2.** Anton Forsberg
3. Artem Zub	**7.** Nikolas Matinpalo	**3.** Leevi Merilainen
4. Nick Jensen	**8.** Dennis Gilbert	🟥 INJURED

FANTASY ZONE

DYLAN COZENS is dubbed the ‘Workhorse From Whitehorse’ for a reason. His mix of durability, size, skill and competitive streak could make him an outstanding playoff performer. This will be his first taste of the NHL playoffs, but he’s a proven performer in high-pressure situations. He’s earned berths on the all-star team at the World Championship and WJC for Canada.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Brady Tkachuk	63	27	25	52	22	0.83	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★★
Tim Stutzle	65	20	47	67	27	1.03	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★★
Jake Sanderson	64	6	39	45	25	0.70	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Drake Batherson	65	18	35	53	25	0.82	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Claude Giroux	65	13	29	42	13	0.65	95	28	53	81	25	0.85	★★
Dylan Cozens	65	13	22	35	5	0.54	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Thomas Chabot	64	5	27	32	5	0.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Ridly Greig	62	11	12	23	6	0.37	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Shane Pinto	53	16	12	28	2	0.53	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
David Perron	28	5	5	10	4	0.36	104	24	37	61	20	0.59	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Linus Ullmark	17-11-3		3	2.68		.912	3-6		0	3.59		.887	★★
Anton Forsberg	9-10-1		2	2.78		.896	-		-	-		.	★

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

ST. LOUIS BLUES

THE X-FACTOR

Though Jordan Binnington left much to be desired with his 2020 and 2021 post-season performances, don't discount him for his playoff brilliance. In 2019, Binnington was exceptional, outduelling Connor Hellebuyck, Ben Bishop and Tuukka Rask. And in 2022, he returned from injury in time to seal St. Louis' first-round win over Minnesota and put a scare into Colorado in the second round before falling injured again. Binnington will be integral to the Blues making the post-season in the first place, and should they punch their ticket to the dance, he'll continue to be essential to St. Louis' success.

JORDAN **BINNINGTON**

WHEN THE BLUES made a miracle run to the playoffs in 2019, followed by an even more inconceivable march to the franchise's first Stanley Cup, it was preceded by a November coaching change. This season, a disappointing start saw the Blues make a November coaching change, as St. Louis cut ties with Drew Bannister in order to snap up free-agent bench boss Jim Montgomery. So, could history repeat itself?

While it does seem a long shot, consider the facts. From Montgomery's hiring through to the trade deadline – a 42-game span – the Blues' underlying metrics improved almost across the board, save for shots and shot attempts per 60 minutes at five-a-side. Even in those two categories, though, St. Louis was better when measured on a percentage basis. And it bore out in production: Montgomery's Blues saw their goals for percentage at 5-on-5 shoot up by an incredible 16.4 percent compared to Bannister's squad. But while the new-look Blues have improved, St. Louis still isn't a true Cup contender. The Blues were still a bottom-half team in most underlying percentages at 5-on-5.

That's not to say St. Louis making a run is impossible. Robert Thomas, Jordan Kyrou and Pavel Buchnevich can carry the attack. Offer-sheet addition Dylan Holloway has also been excellent with the Blues, and young guns Jake Neighbours and Zachary Bolduc are great supporting-cast members. Though the defense is without Colton Parayko down the stretch, there's veteran depth in Justin Faulk and Cam Fowler, and Philip Broberg continues to come into his own. And Jordan Binnington, fresh off backstopping Canada to the 4 Nations Face-Off title, has again proven to be a big-game goalie.

The reality is, however, that this was likely to be a retooling year in St. Louis. Any playoff joy the Blues achieve will simply be a bonus. **– JARED CLINTON**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Jake Neighbours	1. Robert Thomas	1. Pavel Buchnevich
2. Dylan Holloway	2. Brayden Schenn	2. Jordan Kyrou
3. Mathieu Joseph	3. Oskar Sundqvist	3. Zack Bolduc
4. Alexey Toropchenko	4. Radek Faksa	4. Nathan Walker
5. Alexandre Texier	5. Nikita Alexandrov	5. Zach Dean

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Colton Parayko 🟥	5. Torey Krug ⬛	1. Jordan Binnington
2. Justin Faulk	6. Ryan Suter	2. Joel Hofer
3. Cam Fowler	7. Nick Leddy	3. Colten Ellis
4. Philip Broberg	8. Tyler Tucker	

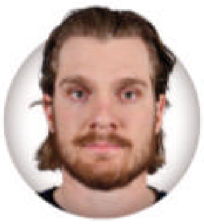
🟥 INJURED ⬛ LTIR

F1RST CUP PASS

RYAN SUTER became the 22nd player in NHL history to play 1,500 games, yet a championship has eluded him. It's time for him to have his Stanley Cup moment.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Robert Thomas	54	17	35	52	11	0.96	45	4	14	18	4	0.40	★★
Jordan Kyrou	66	24	26	50	13	0.76	21	8	2	10	3	0.48	★★
Dylan Holloway	66	21	27	48	11	0.73	26	5	2	7	0	0.27	★★
Pavel Buchnevich	64	13	31	44	11	0.69	20	1	11	12	3	0.60	★★
Brayden Schenn	66	14	26	40	6	0.61	75	11	29	40	15	0.53	★★
Jake Neighbours	66	16	17	33	10	0.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Justin Faulk	62	2	22	24	9	0.39	38	3	14	17	3	0.45	★
Philip Broberg	53	6	15	21	2	0.40	20	2	1	3	0	0.15	★
Cam Fowler	52	7	18	25	4	0.48	62	6	27	33	17	0.53	★
Nick Leddy	16	1	1	2	0	0.13	130	8	30	38	9	0.29	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Jordan Binnington	20-21-4		3	2.83		.897	20-20		1	2.73		.910	★★
Joel Hofer	11-7-3		1	2.87		.900	-		-	-		-	★

FANTASY ZONE



Only four other players remain from the Blues' 2019 Cup-winning squad, but none has seen their role grow more significantly than **ROBERT THOMAS**. He had six points in 21 playoff games as a rookie that spring, but he's since become the No. 1 center and a bona fide point-per-game playmaker. He registers a point 79 percent of the time when he's on the ice when the Blues score a goal.

ERIC BOLTE-IMAGN IMAGES

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

JUST WHEN YOU thought the Lightning would go quietly into the night, they've roared back into elite status. Most figured Tampa Bay would falter after losing its captain and franchise player, but putting some of the band back together and seeing a couple others find their previous form has worked wonders.

If you asked NHL teams if they would want to face the Lightning in the first round of the playoffs, you'd get a bunch of them backing into a hedge the way Homer Simpson does in that popular meme. The Lightning are back, baby, and they are once again doing Lightning-type things. And the way they came out of the gate after the 4 Nations break served notice to the rest of the league that reports of their demise were greatly exaggerated.

The Lightning have always had a high-octane offense, but a huge bounce-back year by goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy and an emphasis on team defense had them sitting with one of the NHL's top goal differentials. Allowing Steven Stamkos to leave via free agency and replacing him with Jake Guentzel was a stroke of genius by GM Julien BriseBois, who made it clear at the trade deadline that he likes proven NHL players much better than unproven prospects or draft picks.

The Lightning can beat you in several ways, and that's what makes them so scary. If you want to open the taps and trade chances, they're comfortable with that. And if you want to drag the game down into the muck, they don't mind the least bit getting a little dirty. They might be the only team in the Eastern Conference that can match the Florida Panthers snarl for snarl.

If you want to nitpick, they don't get a lot of offense from their bottom six, which could pose a problem. Depth can be a deciding factor when it's a wash between two teams' top-end talent. **– KEN CAMPBELL**

NIKITA **KUCHEROV**

THE X-FACTOR

As a Penguin, Jake Guentzel established himself as a clutch goal-scorer, especially in the playoffs. And just like when he rode shotgun with Sidney Crosby in Pittsburgh, he's a front-line player with the Lightning, patrolling the left wing on the top line with Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov. That's a lot of talent for any team to contain, but Guentzel's ability to score when it matters most gives Tampa the ability to play in those close, low-event type of games that the post-season sometimes presents. The Bolts can be confident they have a guy who can change the complexion of a game with one shift.

F1RST CUP PASS

LUKE GLENDENING has been around for a long time, and he's played many thankless roles but has never won a title. He deserves the first hand-off from captain Victor Hedman.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Jake Guentzel	**1.** Brayden Point	**1.** Nikita Kucherov
2. Brandon Hagel	**2.** Anthony Cirelli	**2.** Oliver Bjorkstrand
3. Gage Goncalves	**3.** Yanni Gourde	**3.** Nick Paul
4. Zemgus Girgensons	**4.** Luke Glendening	**4.** Mitchell Chaffee
5. Dylan Duke	**5.** Conor Geekie	**5.** Cam Atkinson

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Victor Hedman	**5.** Darren Raddysh	**1.** Andrei Vasilevskiy
2. Ryan McDonagh	**6.** Nick Perbix	**2.** Jonas Johansson
3. J.J. Moser	**7.** Emil Lilleberg	**3.** Brandon Halverson
4. Erik Cernak	**8.** Maxwell Crozier	

FANTASY ZONE

Coming off his second 30-goal season, **BRANDON HAGEL** has become an integral part of the Lightning attack. He was not viewed as a core player after joining the club in 2021-22 and scored six goals in 45 regular-season and playoff games combined while averaging just under 14 minutes per game in his first season. Since then, he's averaged 29 goals a season and almost 20 minutes per game.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Nikita Kucherov	61	28	64	92	36	1.51	147	53	114	167	71	1.14	★★★★★
Brayden Point	60	32	33	65	26	1.08	87	42	45	87	33	1.00	★★★★
Jake Guentzel	64	32	31	63	21	0.98	69	38	29	67	10	0.97	★★★★
Brandon Hagel	65	30	42	72	8	1.11	34	6	10	16	1	0.47	★★★★
Victor Hedman	62	11	40	51	21	0.82	165	23	94	117	51	0.71	★★★★
Anthony Cirelli	63	20	25	45	5	0.71	103	17	25	42	5	0.41	★★★
Nick Paul	59	19	16	35	5	0.59	34	8	4	12	2	0.35	★★
Darren Raddysh	56	4	25	29	7	0.52	9	1	1	2	0	0.22	★★
Oliver Bjorkstrand	65	17	21	38	8	0.58	45	10	10	20	3	0.44	★★
Yanni Gourde	40	6	13	19	1	0.48	83	20	22	42	5	0.51	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Andrei Vasilevskiy	30-18-3		4	2.29		.920	66-46		7	2.41		.920	★★★★★
Jonas Johansson	7-5-2		1	3.12		.896	-		-	-		-	★

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

THE X-FACTOR

Many observers have opined that once Matthew Knies figures out how good he can be in the NHL, he will be a scary piece of work. Well, he's beginning to get the idea. Knies gives the Leafs size, skill and a net-front presence that is so important in the post-season. He's more talented than a lot of people think, and he's beginning to come to the realization that he can be very difficult to contain when he gets his feet going or plants himself in front of the net. This season has been an offensive coming-out party for Knies, and if that continues into the playoffs, you could just about make it a 'Core Five.'

WILLIAM NYLANDER

THEY NO LONGER have the ignominy of not being able to win in the playoffs hanging over their heads, but the Maple Leafs have a long way to go before they come close to realizing their potential as legitimate Stanley Cup contenders.

This team has all the tools to make this year the one, but it's also a squad that could easily bow out in Round 1. So the Leafs forge on, in many ways reinventing themselves and changing their identity under GM Brad Treliving. But the constant is that this team will go only as far as its highly paid and regarded stars take them. And as of yet, that hasn't been nearly far enough.

The Maple Leafs shed their identity as a bunch of high-octane, no-defense chance-traders a while ago, but the perception still seems to exist. Treliving has done a good job of improving the defensive area of the game and reinforced the blueline with the acquisition of Brandon Carlo at the trade deadline. More importantly, though, is that with the tandem of Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll, they have the best and most reliable goaltending they've enjoyed since the Ed Belfour era.

It might sound crazy, but the real bugaboo for this team might be offense. Hampered by injuries, Auston Matthews has seen a precipitous dip in his goal production. Their best triggerman this season, William Nylander, tends to go dry for extended periods of time. That has Leafs fans a little nervous, especially considering that the post-season problem the past couple of years has been that when they've really needed a spark, their best offensive players have gone missing.

The fact the Leafs play in the brutally tough Atlantic means they'll have to be at their best right away, particularly if they don't win the division title. But they're better equipped to handle the battle than they ever have been. **– KEN CAMPBELL**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Matthew Knies	**1.** Auston Matthews	**1.** Mitch Marner
2. Bobby McMann	**2.** John Tavares	**2.** William Nylander
3. Calle Jarnkrok	**3.** Scott Laughton	**3.** Max Domi
4. Nick Robertson	**4.** David Kampf	**4.** Steven Lorentz
5. Max Pacioretty ✚	**5.** Pontus Holmberg	**5.** Ryan Reaves

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Morgan Rielly	**5.** Brandon Carlo	**1.** Anthony Stolarz
2. Oliver Ekman-Larsson	**6.** Simon Benoit	**2.** Joseph Woll
3. Jake McCabe	**7.** Philippe Myers	**3.** Dennis Hildeby
4. Chris Tanev	**8.** Jani Hakanpaa ✚	

✚ INJURED

F1RST CUP PASS

JOHN TAVARES won't get it first because he stepped aside as captain to make way for Auston Matthews. But, with nearly 1,200 games played and no Cup, he should be second.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Mitch Marner	64	21	59	80	27	1.25	57	11	39	50	17	0.88	★★★★★
Auston Matthews	50	23	33	56	17	1.12	55	23	25	48	14	0.87	★★★★★
William Nylander	65	36	31	67	25	1.03	54	20	23	43	9	0.80	★★★★★
John Tavares	58	27	29	56	15	0.97	62	23	23	46	14	0.74	★★★★
Matthew Knies	61	24	19	43	10	0.70	14	3	4	7	0	0.50	★★★
Bobby McMann	57	17	11	28	6	0.49	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Max Domi	57	5	21	26	7	0.46	50	7	19	26	2	0.52	★★
Morgan Rielly	65	7	26	33	13	0.51	57	11	29	40	9	0.70	★★
Oliver Ekman-Larsson	64	4	22	26	4	0.41	49	4	10	14	9	0.29	★★
Scott Laughton	63	11	16	27	0	0.43	24	6	4	10	0	0.42	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Anthony Stolarz	13-7-3		1	2.37		.920	0-0		0	5.17		.842	★★★
Joseph Woll	22-12-0		1	2.78		.905	3-2		0	1.78		.933	★★

FANTASY ZONE

MITCH MARNER is one of the summer's most intriguing UFAs, and he placed a big bet on himself and the Leafs after reportedly nixing a deal to Carolina. The pressure couldn't be higher with his long-term future in question. But he still leads the Leafs in playoff points per game (0.88) since his rookie season, and he's coming off arguably the best regular season of his career.

NICK TURCHIARO-IMAGN IMAGES

POWER RANKING | 20TH

UTAH HOCKEY CLUB

CLAYTON KELLER

IT'D BE EASY to chalk up Utah's push for the playoffs in its debut campaign as Year 1 magic. Full buildings, fewer distractions and the franchise's newfound energy can go a long way, after all. But to do so would discount the work that coach Andre Tourigny, GM Bill Armstrong and the players have done to turn the club into a legitimate wild-card contender.

Consider the underlying stats. As of the trade deadline, on a percentage basis at 5-on-5, Utah ranked seventh in shots, sixth in shot attempts, fifth in scoring chances, eighth in high-danger chances and fifth in expected goals. What has held Utah back is that its five-a-side shooting percentage was among the NHL's worst. Through mid-March, Utah ranked 26th in the league in that metric.

But those struggles point to the major issue in Utah: the Hockey Club lacks the firepower to truly contend.

Yes, Nick Schmaltz is a reliable second-line option, Logan Cooley is having a superb sophomore season and Dylan Guenther is exhibiting future 40-goal potential, but the fact remains that scoring leader Clayton Keller was on pace to eclipse Utah's next-best producer by more than 20 points. With the way the rest of the Central Division loaded up, Utah has a distinct talent disadvantage – and it only becomes more glaring as you move down the lineup.

Where Utah can hang with others is defensively. Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino, Sean Durzi and Olli Maatta don't form a Grade-A blueline, but it's a solid 'B.' And with the way netminder Karel Vejmelka has played this season, Utah's crease is no concern. As of the deadline, the only goalies to play as many minutes as Vejmelka and post a better 5-on-5 save percentage were Filip Gustavsson, Andrei Vasilevskiy and Connor Hellebuyck. Vejmelka's performance down the stretch could push Utah into the playoffs. **– JARED CLINTON**

THE X-FACTOR

There are a few Cup winners in Utah, but none has played a bigger part in their team's playoff success than Mikhail Sergachev. A statement acquisition in the off-season, Sergachev has been exactly what Utah needed: a minute-munching two-way D-man. And his playoff experience is the cherry on top. Having been to the top of the mountain, he can act as a guiding light for many in Utah. Sergachev will be leaned on heavily should Utah squeak into a wild-card spot, and how he fares against tough competition will determine whether the club pens a Cinderella story or simply one of hope that brighter days are ahead.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

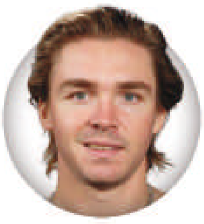
LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Clayton Keller	1. Logan Cooley	1. Nick Schmaltz
2. Alexander Kerfoot	2. Barrett Hayton	2. Dylan Guenther
3. Lawson Crouse	3. Kevin Stenlund	3. Josh Doan
4. Matias Maccelli	4. Nick Bjugstad	4. Michael Carcone
5. Liam O'Brien	5. Jack McBain	5. Kailer Yamamoto

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Mikhail Sergachev	5. Ian Cole	1. Karel Vejmelka
2. John Marino	6. Michael Kesselring	2. Connor Ingram ⬛
3. Olli Maatta	7. Robert Bortuzzo 🟥	3. Jaxson Stauber
4. Sean Durzi	8. Nick DeSimone	🟥 INJURED ⬛ PERSONAL

F1RST CUP PASS

LAWSON CROUSE went through thick and thin with the Coyotes franchise. Getting the Cup from Clayton Keller, the only player with more time in the organization, would be fitting.

FANTASY ZONE



CLAYTON KELLER led the team in scoring in his lone playoff appearance in 2019-20, with seven points in nine games, and he's capping off his best regular season. No one else in Utah's lineup offers as much offensive upside as Keller, who leads the team in virtually every offensive category. Utah will lean on him even more in the playoffs despite his lack of reps.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Clayton Keller	65	23	51	74	31	1.14	9	4	3	7	1	0.78	★★★
Logan Cooley	59	17	30	47	16	0.80	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Dylan Guenther	54	24	24	48	23	0.89	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Mikhail Sergachev	61	11	32	43	19	0.70	100	9	25	34	10	0.34	★★
Nick Schmaltz	66	16	35	51	20	0.77	4	0	0	0	0	0.00	★
Barrett Hayton	66	17	21	38	10	0.58	3	0	0	0	0	0.00	★
Sean Durzi	14	1	3	4	0	0.29	13	2	2	4	2	0.31	★
Michael Kesselring	66	6	19	25	3	0.38	-	-	-	-	-	-	★
Alexander Kerfoot	66	8	10	18	1	0.27	48	6	12	18	2	0.38	★
Lawson Crouse	65	10	4	14	1	0.22	9	2	0	2	0	0.22	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Karel Vejmelka	18-17-6		1	2.49		.908	-		-	-		-	★★
Jaxson Stauber	2-1-1		1	2.23		.925	-		-	-		-	★

DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

VANCOUVER CANUCKS

THE X-FACTOR

It will take Quinn Hughes just six seasons to climb past 224 other players and into first place among Vancouver's all-time list of points by a defenseman. He was at 393 points in mid-March and trailed only Alexander Edler's 409 points. And it will take the 25-year-old Hughes fewer than half the number of games it took Edler. That's the type of player Hughes has been for the Canucks. Zone breakouts and power-play opportunities filter through him. It's a credit to his skill and character that he's producing at a better pace than a year ago when the Canucks were firing on all cylinders and he won the Norris Trophy.

QUINN **HUGHES**

THE 109-POINT season Vancouver posted a year ago seems like ancient history now, doesn't it? The Canucks will be lucky to get to 90 this season, and with the departuresof 103-point man J.T. Miller and Carson Soucy down the stretch, just making the playoffs is a large hill to climb.

Internal fractures caused the shakeup in the roster. What once seemed like a happy, cohesive unit under coach Rick Tocchet a year ago has turned into a rebuild-on-the-fly project. And with goalie Thatcher Demko ailing, the Canucks are long shots to make it out of the first round if they do make the playoffs, no matter who they face.

The Vancouver offense has struggled all season. Anyone who predicted Elias Pettersson would be trailing both Pius Suter and Kiefer Sherwood in goal-scoring would've been hockey taped up into a ball and pushed down the stairs of Grouse Mountain.

The Canucks tied Tampa for the league lead with a 12.0 shooting percentage last season. That's down to the middle of the pack at 10.6 this season.

Even though Kevin Lankinen has been commendable all season in taking over in the crease, the loss of Demko in his prime has taken points of the standings board for the Canucks. The defense has been neither strong nor deep enough to offset the loss of what Demko provided.

Personality clashes in the dressing room may also be responsible for Vancouver's inability to battle back this season. The Canucks were the last team in the league to win a game when trailing after two periods. That's a sign they just don't believe in themselves – or at least some of them don't.

Stranger things could happen, though, right? There's a high likelihood Pettersson will eventually revert closer to his mean. And the Canucks do like the challenge of taking on favorites. **– BRIAN COSTELLO**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Jake DeBrusk	**1.** Elias Pettersson	**1.** Conor Garland
2. Drew O'Connor	**2.** Filip Chytil	**2.** Brock Boeser
3. Dakota Joshua	**3.** Pius Suter	**3.** Jonathan Lekkerimaki
4. Nils Hoglander	**4.** Teddy Blueger	**4.** Kiefer Sherwood
5. Nils Aman	**5.** Aatu Raty	**5.** Max Sasson

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Quinn Hughes	**5.** Derek Forbort	**1.** Thatcher Demko ✚
2. Filip Hronek	**6.** Noah Juulsen ✚	**2.** Kevin Lankinen
3. Marcus Pettersson	**7.** Elias Pettersson	**3.** Arturs Silovs
4. Tyler Myers	**8.** Victor Mancini	✚ INJURED

FIRST CUP PASS

ELIAS PETTERSSON is sure to get the first pass from captain Quinn Hughes. After the most tumultuous season of his career, it would be a sweet lift for the embattled Swede.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Quinn Hughes	51	14	47	61	23	1.20	30	2	24	26	14	0.87	★★★
Elias Pettersson	59	14	25	39	15	0.66	30	8	16	24	12	0.80	★★
Brock Boeser	58	18	20	38	16	0.66	29	11	12	23	8	0.79	★★
Jake DeBrusk	65	23	14	37	15	0.57	86	27	20	47	17	0.55	★★
Filip Hronek	44	4	21	25	7	0.57	13	1	1	2	0	0.15	★★
Conor Garland	65	16	23	39	13	0.60	21	4	3	7	0	0.33	★★
Filip Chytil	55	13	13	26	5	0.47	36	8	5	13	1	0.36	★
Pius Suter	64	17	13	30	4	0.47	13	2	1	3	0	0.23	★
Kiefer Sherwood	61	14	11	25	1	0.41	8	1	1	2	0	0.25	★
Tyler Myers	63	5	17	22	1	0.35	61	7	9	16	6	0.26	★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Thatcher Demko ✚	6-6-3		1	2.87		.891	3-1		1	0.97		.974	★★
Kevin Lankinen	23-12-7		4	2.55		.904	-		-	-		-	★★

FANTASY ZONE

As free agency looms amid a tough regular season for **BROCK BOESER**, it's worth remembering he has been the Canucks' playoff goal leader (11) in their past two playoff runs and tied for the team lead in playoff points (12) last spring. Whatever's causing Elias Pettersson's dip in points may not get resolved this year, which leaves Boeser as the Canucks' go-to option on offense.

BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

DEPTH AND SIZE are the two calling cards that Vegas flashes every spring in anticipation of a long playoff run. And both are extremely important for teams expecting to play games well into June.

The balanced and seasoned Golden Knights attack got even steadier with the acquisitions of Brandon Saad and Reilly Smith for middle-six roles. Both have 200-plus career goals and have played more than 100 playoff games. The Vegas forward cast is now 15 players deep, with six regulars – Nicolas Roy, Tanner Pearson, Keegan Kolesar, Victor Olofsson, Alexander Holtz and Cole Schwindt – vying for fourth-line duties. No NHL team is deeper.

That depth is matched by size on the Vegas blueline. Shea Theodore and Zach Whitecloud, hardly two wilting violets, are the shortest defensemen at 6-foot-2. Beyond their size, though, the big three of Theodore, Alex Pietrangelo and Noah Hanifin are as steady, skilled and reliable as any team's top three defensemen. And the toughness of Whitecloud, Brayden McNabb, Nicolas Hague and Kaedan Korczak becomes even more valuable in the playoffs.

In the crease, Adin Hill had a slow start with a dreadful .875 save percentage and 3.41 goals-against average in the first month of play. But since Nov. 13, Hill's SP (.913) and GAA (2.33) have improved dramatically. Ilya Samsonov runs hot and cold, but he has allowed Hill not to be overworked.

Vegas hasn't been a particularly successful team on the road this season, winning a little less than half the time. In the first-round playoff loss to Dallas last year, Vegas lost both Games 5 and 7 on the road. Adding more scoring depth may help that this spring. The road to the West final will almost surely go through Edmonton, and that will be can't-miss hockey. **– BRIAN COSTELLO**

JACK
EICHEL

MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES

THE X-FACTOR

Jack Eichel is enjoying the most prolific season of his 10-year career, approaching a 100-point pace through mid-March. Expectations have been high for Eichel since he was labelled a generational-type player and drafted second overall behind Connor McDavid in 2015. Has he delivered to those standards? Not quite, but he is a bona fide franchise center who could redefine his status with a boffo spring. In a conference boasting McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon as perhaps the top two players in the game, Eichel has to find another gear to compete with them head-to-head. Stay tuned.

F1RST CUP PASS

A lot of Golden Knights are already sporting Stanley Cup rings. Two players who haven't won are **TOMAS HERTL** and Noah Hanifin. They'll get the first and second Cup pass.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Ivan Barbashev	**1.** Jack Eichel	**1.** Mark Stone
2. Pavel Dorofeyev	**2.** Tomas Hertl	**2.** Brett Howden
3. Brandon Saad	**3.** William Karlsson	**3.** Reilly Smith
4. Victor Olofsson	**4.** Nicolas Roy	**4.** Keegan Kolesar
5. Alexander Holtz	**5.** Tanner Pearson	**5.** Cole Schwindt

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. Alex Pietrangelo	**5.** Zach Whitecloud	**1.** Adin Hill
2. Shea Theodore 🟥	**6.** Nicolas Hague	**2.** Ilya Samsonov
3. Noah Hanifin	**7.** Kaedan Korczak	**3.** Akira Schmid
4. Brayden McNabb	**8.** Ben Hutton	🟥 INJURED

FANTASY ZONE

Though an oft-injured **TOMAS HERTL** made a valiant effort in a seven-game opening round last year, he managed just one goal. He's a power center built for the playoffs, however, and in his final two playoff runs with San Jose, he scored 16 goals in 29 games. Hertl will also help the Knights in the faceoff circle after they struggled in last year's playoffs (48.5 percent; 12th overall).

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Jack Eichel	65	21	59	80	30	1.23	29	9	24	33	10	1.14	★★★★★
Mark Stone	52	17	41	58	23	1.12	102	37	40	77	19	0.75	★★★★
Shea Theodore	55	7	41	48	19	0.87	114	15	53	68	20	0.60	★★★★
Tomas Hertl	66	27	28	55	21	0.83	69	25	18	43	15	0.62	★★★
Alex Pietrangelo	63	4	24	28	1	0.44	139	13	61	74	19	0.53	★★★
Noah Hanifin	66	9	23	32	7	0.48	34	2	11	13	4	0.38	★★★
Ivan Barbashev	55	19	23	42	2	0.76	79	10	21	31	2	0.39	★★★
Pavel Dorofeyev	66	27	16	43	15	0.65	1	0	0	0	0	0.00	★★★
Victor Olofsson	44	11	11	22	7	0.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★
Nicolas Roy	56	9	15	24	3	0.43	68	8	20	28	2	0.41	★★

GOALIE	**W-L-OT**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	**W-L**	**SO**	**GAA**	**SP**	
Adin Hill	24-11-5	4	2.54	.907	12-6	3	2.09	.932	★★★★
Ilya Samsonov	15-8-3	2	2.81	.889	6-14	0	3.05	.901	★

WASHINGTON CAPITALS

ALEX
OVECHKIN

THE X-FACTOR

'Tom Wilson Insurance' premiums may not be as high as they were five years ago, and the brooding power forward is no longer a fightin' machine – but Wilson had already broken his career high for goals in a season before February ended, so there's another reason to fear him. On top of his physicality and scoring ability, Wilson is also a key voice in the Capitals' dressing room and a 12-year pro who has already won a Stanley Cup in Washington. He knows what it takes to go all the way, and when the game gets harder to play in the postseason, you want a big body with ill intent like Wilson on your side.

WHAT FELT LIKE a season with only one purpose – get Alex Ovechkin the all-time goals record – quickly became multi-pronged when Washington bucked outside expectations by going on a campaign-long heater. Simply put, the Capitals have been one of the NHL's best teams, and they have the statistics to back it up. Top offense? Check. Top three in goals against? Check. Top 10 on both the power play and penalty kill? You better believe that's a check.

The only stat that dings the Caps a little is expected goals percentage, where they rank just 13th – but even there, it's not like the team is bottom of the barrel.

The most impressive aspect of the Capitals this season has been the work done by the front office. The off-season acquisitions of defenseman Jakob Chychrun and center Pierre-Luc Dubois have both looked like master strokes, filling out a roster that has gone through a decent amount of change in recent years due to the losses of key veterans such as Nicklas Backstrom and T.J. Oshie. Toss in the maturation of kids such as Aliaksei Protas and Connor McMichael and Washington is a deep squad that also features two goalies who can win you a series in Logan Thompson and Charlie Lindgren.

If there's a fly in the ointment, it's that the advanced stats aren't as strong as the old-school numbers. Washington's PDO – a stat involving shooting percentage and save percentage – is the highest in the league at 103.3. The nerds will say that's a bad thing because you want to be as close to 100 as possible. On the other hand, great goaltending is great goaltending. The true worry is that Ovechkin, Protas and Tom Wilson don't continue to score on 20 percent of their shots.

Regardless, this is a Capitals team with the potential to go all the way. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Alex Ovechkin	1. Dylan Strome	1. Tom Wilson
2. Connor McMichael	2. Pierre-Luc Dubois	2. Aliaksei Protas
3. Andrew Mangiapane	3. Nic Dowd	3. T.J. Oshie ⊞
4. Sonny Milano ✚	4. Lars Eller	4. Taylor Raddysh
5. Brandon Duhaime	5. Ethen Frank	5. Anthony Beauvillier

DEFENSE		GOALIE
1. John Carlson	5. Rasmus Sandin	1. Logan Thompson
2. Jakob Chychrun	6. Trevor van Riemsdyk	2. Charlie Lindgren
3. Matt Roy	7. Alexander Alexeyev	3. Hunter Shepard
4. Martin Fehervary	8. Dylan McIlrath	

✚ INJURED ⊞ LTIR

F1RST CUP PASS

Neither Chychrun nor Dubois has won a Cup, but **JOHN CARLSON** is the active player with the longest tenure after captain Ovechkin. He deserves to lift the mug again quickly.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	GP	G	A	PTS	PPP	P/G	GP	G	A	PTS	PPP	P/G	RATING
Alex Ovechkin	51	34	21	55	15	1.08	151	72	69	141	61	0.93	★★★★
Dylan Strome	67	21	44	65	26	0.97	13	3	2	5	1	0.38	★★★★
Tom Wilson	66	29	27	56	16	0.85	87	15	19	34	7	0.39	★★★
Pierre-Luc Dubois	67	17	42	59	10	0.88	43	11	16	27	7	0.63	★★★
John Carlson	67	4	40	44	12	0.66	127	20	55	75	42	0.59	★★★
Jakob Chychrun	62	18	24	42	14	0.68	9	1	0	1	1	0.11	★★★
Connor McMichael	67	23	28	51	10	0.76	8	1	1	2	0	0.25	★★★
Aliaksei Protas	67	29	30	59	1	0.88	4	0	2	2	0	0.50	★★★
Andrew Mangiapane	66	11	12	23	2	0.35	27	6	6	12	1	0.44	★★
Taylor Raddysh	67	7	19	26	1	0.39	-	-	-	-	-	-	★★

GOALIE	W-L-OT	SO	GAA	SP	W-L	SO	GAA	SP	
Logan Thompson	29-4-5	2	2.32	.916	2-2	0	2.35	.921	★★★★
Charlie Lindgren	15-11-3	1	2.65	.899	0-4	0	3.58	.864	★

FANTASY ZONE

The best goal-scorer we've ever witnessed continues to be a focal point of the Caps' offense even in his 20th NHL season. **ALEX OVECHKIN** has scored just three goals in 15 games over his past three playoff runs, but he's also scoring at a pace this season reminiscent of the Capitals' Cup-winning 2017-18 campaign, when he strafed opposing goalies for 15 goals in 24 playoff games.

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

WINNIPEG JETS

MARK **SCHEIFELE**

LAST SUMMER, THE Jets bid adieu to their coach, backup goalie and two major in-season adds, and they followed that up with modest UFA signings. The belief was Winnipeg was set for a decline. Instead, the Jets set an NHL record with 14 wins in their first 15 games and entered the playoffs following a Presidents' Trophy dogfight.

The key to Winnipeg's success has been its attack, highlighted by Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor, who entered the stretch run ranked third and fifth in goals, respectively. And in Gabe Vilardi, they've found the perfect winger for their top line. The first line's success has maybe obscured the lack of center depth, and the pressure on the unit will be increased by the lack of big deadline adds. Brandon Tanev, who brings energy to the middle six, was the only acquisition up front.

But even if there are struggles, much of the offense has come on the power play. Assistant coach Davis Payne, brought in by new coach Scott Arniel, has turned the PP into a nightmare for opponents. After running at an 18.8-percent clip last year, Winnipeg's power play sat atop the NHL for much of this season thanks to dizzying puck movement and plenty of creativity.

For his part, Josh Morrissey has quarterbacked the top unit and, in the process, is again putting his name in the Norris Trophy debate. Neal Pionk has likewise had a brilliant campaign, and the Dylans – DeMelo and Samberg – have proven essential to a staunch defense. Through 60 games, Winnipeg had given up the fewest even-strength goals per 60 minutes and had the 10th-best expected goals against rate.

After six months of winter, Winnipeggers will have grown tired of the snow. But if all goes well, they'll be preparing – and hoping – for a Whiteout lasting well into June. **– JARED CLINTON**

THE X-FACTOR

Connor Hellebuyck is a four-time Vezina Trophy finalist, two-time winner and has twice finished sixth in Hart Trophy voting. Since 2017-18, no goalie has made more saves or posted more shutouts, and the only NHL regular with a better save percentage has played 330 fewer games. Yet Hellebuyck's playoff stats since the Jets' run to the Western Conference final in 2018 – a 9-19 record, .905 SP and 3.13 GAA – leave a lot to be desired. If regular-season Hellebuyck shows up in the playoffs, he alone could will Winnipeg to a Cup. If not, the Jets could see their 82-game effort be all for naught.

F1RST CUP PASS

No one represents the team better than **MARK SCHEIFELE**. The first pick in Jets 2.0 history hoisting Winnipeg's first Stanley Cup would make for a special moment.

DEPTH CHART | 2024-25

LEFT WING	CENTER	RIGHT WING
1. Kyle Connor	**1.** Mark Scheifele	**1.** Gabe Vilardi
2. Nikolaj Ehlers	**2.** Vladislav Namestnikov	**2.** Cole Perfetti
3. Nino Niederreiter	**3.** Adam Lowry	**3.** Mason Appleton
4. Brandon Tanev	**4.** Morgan Barron	**4.** Alex Iafallo
5. Rasmus Kupari	**5.** David Gustafsson	**5.** Brad Lambert

DEFENSE

1. Josh Morrissey
2. Dylan DeMelo
3. Neal Pionk ✚
4. Dylan Samberg
5. Luke Schenn
6. Haydn Fleury
7. Colin Miller
8. Logan Stanley

GOALIE

1. Connor Hellebuyck
2. Eric Comrie
3. Chris Driedger

✚ INJURED

FANTASY ZONE

The Jets will need all hands on deck in a tough Central Division. **NIKOLAJ EHLERS** anchors their second line and must carry over his excellent regular season into the playoffs to help the Jets win – and to cash in as a 2025 UFA. He has only four goals in 37 career playoff games, and he averaged less than 16 minutes per game last post-season; he'll get much more ice time this spring.

	2024-25						CAREER PLAYOFFS						
SKATER	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**GP**	**G**	**A**	**PTS**	**PPP**	**P/G**	**RATING**
Kyle Connor	67	35	49	84	28	1.25	45	15	17	32	6	0.71	★★★★★
Mark Scheifele	67	35	40	75	23	1.12	42	21	17	38	11	0.90	★★★★★
Josh Morrissey	66	10	42	52	21	0.79	42	5	9	14	4	0.33	★★★★
Gabriel Vilardi	67	27	34	61	25	0.91	12	2	6	8	2	0.67	★★★★
Nikolaj Ehlers	58	21	36	57	21	0.98	37	4	10	14	4	0.38	★★★★
Cole Perfetti	67	13	27	40	14	0.60	1	0	0	0	0	0.00	★★★
Neal Pionk	66	9	28	37	11	0.56	22	0	14	14	7	0.64	★★★
Nino Niederreiter	67	14	16	30	8	0.45	92	16	20	36	6	0.39	★★
Vladislav Namestnikov	63	11	20	31	10	0.49	57	7	7	14	2	0.25	★★
Adam Lowry	59	14	15	29	0	0.49	49	11	9	20	2	0.41	★★
GOALIE	**W-L-OT**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	**W-L**		**SO**	**GAA**		**SP**	
Connor Hellebuyck	39-9-3		6	1.97		.927	18-27		3	2.85		.911	★★★★★
Eric Comrie	7-8-1		1	2.46		.914	-		-	-		-	★

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NHL

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD

When it comes to playoff pools, your best chance at winning is to pick a team and load up

CALE MAKAR & CONNOR MCDAVID

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

WITH THE END OF the 2024-25 regular season in sight, it's important to remember one last thing: it's not over yet. The fantasy hockey season does not end when the regular season ends, especially with the best part – the NHL playoffs – right around the corner. As long as games are being played, fantasy GMs require an outlet to satiate their hunger for more hockey and competition. Thus, the playoff pool was born. To quote *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come."

Fantasy hockey pools during the playoffs tend to work differently from regular-season leagues, and they're arguably more challenging but just as fun. There are generally two kinds of playoff fantasy pools: box pools and playoff pools.

Playoff pools are the more traditional format, where fantasy GMs create their own fantasy teams by picking a set number of players per position. In box pools, fantasy GMs pick one player from a box – a group of players of similar value or who play the same position – and do the same for multiple boxes to fill out their fantasy team. Scoring in both leagues is generally the same; each statistic is assigned a point value, and the fantasy team with the highest point total at the end of the playoffs wins.

Since only 16 NHL teams make the playoffs, the pool of players is reduced by half. Given the limited player options, many playoff pools eschew regular-season style drafts and allow GMs to pick the same players. It sounds simple enough, but they're not easy to win.

Playoff pools aren't a marathon like regular-season leagues, and they tend to favor the brave and the bold. My preferred strategy is to stack one team – or maybe a few – that you expect to go deep in the post-season. In playoff pools, quantity is king: the further a team advances, the more games a player on that team will play and the more opportunities he will have to score points. Since it's a winner-take-all format in playoff pools, the mantra is, "go big or go home."

Every fantasy GM will have different biases and notions of how the playoffs will play out, ensuring that few GMs will make identical picks. GMs can push all-in on a Cup favorite and hope everything goes according to plan or be a contrarian and go all-in on a potential Cinderella.

It can be difficult to pick the teams that go deep – and the best players from their roster – in an anything-can-happen type of tournament. Also, a single team usually won't have enough quality players at each position to fill out an entire fantasy roster, which forces GMs to pick players from different teams. If, for example, you stack the Winnipeg Jets and pick Josh Morrissey and Neal Pionk on defense but need two more defensemen to fill out your roster, it's best to skip Dylan DeMelo and go for someone such as Washington's John Carlson or Jakob Chychrun instead.

Here are a few suggestions for your playoff pool. Good luck, and be bold.

›TARGET

Dallas Stars: The Stars have plenty of players to target – their scoring lines during the season ran three deep, even without the injured Tyler Seguin – making them an ideal team to stack in playoff pools. The Jets will be a popular pick due to their regular-season success, but it's important to remember that Connor Hellebuyck hasn't been good in the past two post-seasons. With the divisional playoff format, the Stars are a good bet to come out from the Central side of the playoff bracket.

Connor McDavid: Remember what I said about quantity being king? Well, there's always an exception to every rule. McDavid scored 10 more points than the second-highest scorer last spring, and in the previous post-season, he finished tied for sixth in playoff scoring with 20 points in 12 games, just six points behind leader Jack Eichel even though McDavid played 10 fewer playoff games.

›FADE

Carolina Hurricanes: Maybe this is the year – which makes Carolina a contrarian pick – but no matter what roster upgrades they make, the Canes never seem to be able to win a game after the second round. Their inability to score when the games tighten up in the later rounds has been a big issue, and that's never good for your fantasy team. In their last round over the past three playoff runs, they've averaged just over two goals per game. And ending up with rookie Logan Stankoven as the return for Martin Necas/Mikko Rantanen won't help.

Quinn Hughes: There will be (numerous) times in playoff pools where you'll have to stay away from the big names, and Hughes is one of the stars to avoid. He was easily a top-five fantasy blueliner during the season, but the Canucks are unlikely to go far. A lesser defenseman on a team expected to go further, such as Devon Toews on the Colorado Avalanche, is a wiser pick.

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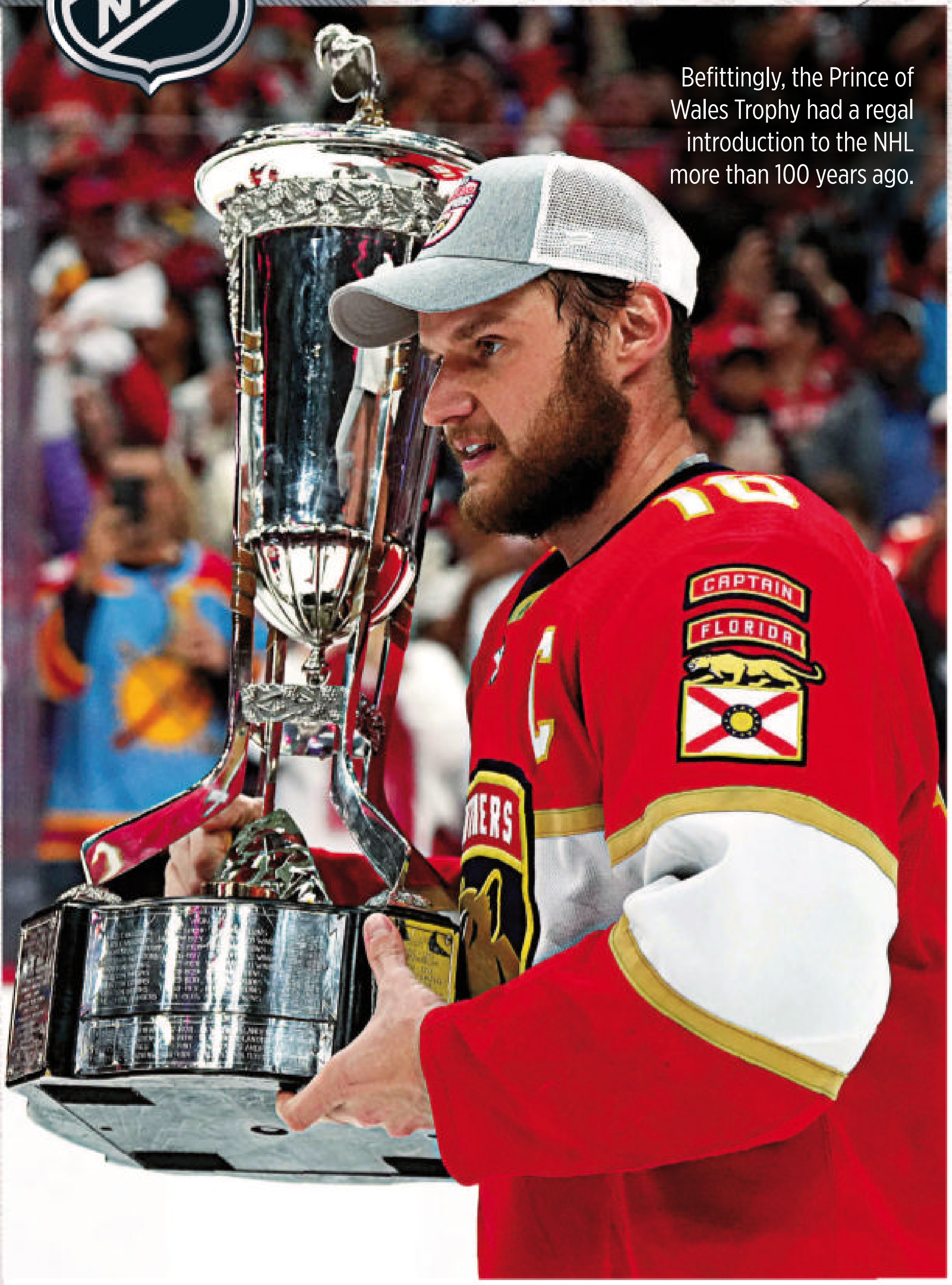
A PRINCE OF A TROPHY

A CROSS-COUNTRY VACATION, ROYAL CORONATION AND HISTORIC ABDICATION: THE STORY OF THE FORGOTTEN **PRINCE OF WALES** AND HIS EPONYMOUS NHL TROPHY GOES BACK TO 1924

BY JOSH CASPER



Befittingly, the Prince of Wales Trophy had a regal introduction to the NHL more than 100 years ago.

JASEN VINLOVE-USA TODAY SPORTS

IN 1938, EDWARD VIII, the former Prince of Wales, publicly congratulated the NHL's Boston Bruins on winning the Prince of Wales Trophy, which he had donated nearly a decade-and-a-half earlier, for the only time on record.

Two years earlier, the entire British Empire listened with bated breath as King Edward VIII told his subjects that he could not be their king without the support of the woman he loved. He was thus abdicating the throne, and he would become the Duke of Windsor the following year. 'The Abdication,' like 'The Cup,' is self-explanatory. Royalty, like sports, is, if nothing else, theater. The Royal Family attempted to erase Edward, now a failed king remembered as the charismatic Prince of Wales, from history so the new reticent king might step out of his brother's vast shadow.

Similar mythology surrounds the Prince of Wales Trophy, such as why the Montreal Canadiens had their name engraved twice. The silver chalice hovers above an uncut crystal at the base – to symbolize ice – and is buttressed by four legs shaped like gold hockey sticks, surrounded by four golden hockey pucks. Francophone hockey fans often mistake the Prince of Wales feathers atop the trophy, which is emblazoned with the Royal Arms of Canada, for a *fleur de lis*. Prince Edward gifted the $2,500 trophy (equal to about $45,000 today) to the NHL in 1925.

As the Prince of Wales, Edward was renowned worldwide, especially in North America, where he became a symbol of a generation as the jazz-loving bachelor who also endured the travails of war. In 1919, Edward crisscrossed Canada from St. John's, Nfld., to Vancouver on a special Canadian Pacific Railway train.

"I want Canada to look upon me as Canadian, if not actually by birth, yet certainly in mind and spirit," said the Prince of Wales in St. John's.

Edward developed a particular affection for the Canadian West and its pioneering ranchers. Before coming back east to America, the prince bought a cattle ranch in Alberta's High River Valley that he visited five times during the next decade. He said the Canadian West was one of the few places that treated him like a person rather than a prince.

"Canada is a great country," said Edward to comedian Will Rogers. The prince described Canadians as vigorous and confident.

Americans were more acquainted with the Prince of Wales than with hockey. But that was slowly changing. Ice hockey at the 1924 Chamonix Winter Olympics garnered almost as much attention as (*Chariots of Fire* runner) Harold Abrahams at the Paris Summer Games. Team Canada and the United States facing off for gold only stoked expectations. Suddenly, hockey was heating up.

BAUBLE HEAD
Prince Edward will forever be associated with the NHL thanks to his trophy.

The Prince of Wales, a devoted sportsman, took particular interest and planned to attend. Then, days before the final, the avid steeplechaser was thrown from his horse while trying to clear a five-foot jump.

Edward's equerry noticed a protruding bone: "I am afraid your collarbone is broken, sir."

Unable to move his mangled shoulder, the prince drolly replied: "Yes, I believe it is."

The gold-medal game was shaping up to be a similarly gruesome affair. By the first intermission, the players' blood-soaked sweaters tinged the ice with a crimson hue, mainly from Harry 'Moose' Watson, who was bloodied and knocked out cold for two minutes but returned to score the go-ahead goal. Led by captain Dunc Munro, Canada shut down the Americans and claimed the gold with a 6-1 victory. The U.S. took silver and Great Britain got the bronze.

Though he missed the banquet while recovering from surgery, the Prince of Wales was determined to meet Team Canada. The day before they were set to depart, Edward invited them to York House. Manager William 'Billy' Hewitt and Munro led the team into the prince's study. As they sat by the fireplace, Prince Edward turned to Munro and said, "You will know that dislocating a collarbone is not serious. It easily comes out and is easily put back."

They laughed. Hockey was a rough sport. No helmets. So was point-to-point racing. Not wanting a dead Prince of Wales, the British Racing Association made helmets mandatory in 1924.

The prince had never been to a hockey game, but Hewitt was impressed by his hockey IQ. Edward even recognized Harold McMunn, who was added to the Allan Cup-winning Toronto Granites team that represented Canada.

Like the prince, Munro later admitted that his biggest obstacle came after dark. "Just think of the temptation," said Munro of the casinos filled with young French ingenues. "But we resisted it."

Hewitt had them in bed by 10 o'clock, something the prince never mastered. Edward's nocturnal speakeasy adventures became such press fodder during his 1924 New York holiday that King George V never allowed him to return.

"It seemed a great hardship then," Munro quipped. "We did not always feel too friendly to Mr. Hewitt, but we are glad of (him) now."

In 1924, when the NHL added two clubs, the Montreal Maroons and the first U.S. club, the Boston Bruins, Munro signed a three-year, $22,500 contract with the Maroons (over $400,000 today). He played in the first NHL game on U.S. soil, a 2-1 Bruins win at 5,000-seat Boston Arena (now Northeastern's Matthews Arena) over the Maroons.

To familiarize American audiences with pro hockey, newspaper scribes described the new Prince of Wales Trophy as the NHL pennant, given to the NHL champion, whether or not they beat a western team for the Stanley Cup.

"It is not the intention of the prince that his Cup shall displace the Stanley Cup. There is a championship trophy in Canada, the Stanley Cup, but that is the supreme prize of all."

Had the 1924-25 season gone smoothly, the Hamilton Tigers might've won the first Prince of Wales Trophy, but incensed that they would not receive a $200 bonus, Hamilton quit on the eve of the 1924 playoffs. The third-place Canadiens, next up, got to defend their 1923 Stanley Cup and beat second-place Toronto for the NHL title before losing the Stanley Cup final to Victoria of the Western Canada League.

After the Hamilton players declared they would never again play for Hamilton, Tex Rickard, building a new Madison Square Garden, pounced to help bring hockey to his new arena. The New York Americans were born. Instead of awarding the Prince of Wales Trophy to Montreal, the NHL brass saw an opportunity.

The Prince of Wales Trophy was to be awarded to *future* NHL champions, so NHL president Frank Calder decided that the winner of the first game at MSG between the New York Americans and Montreal Canadiens on Dec. 15, 1925, would receive the trophy until the next NHL championship.

The Canadiens, reeling without terminally ill goaltender Georges Vezina, beat the Americans 3-1 to earn the first Prince of Wales Trophy. The defending NHL champions, the Canadiens later engraved their name twice: once for their 1924 NHL title and again for winning the Prince of Wales Trophy game.

In March, before an afternoon game between the Maroons and Canadiens, thousands of fans queued in front of silversmith Mappin & Webb's display window on Rue Ste-Catherine to see the Prince of Wales Trophy, which stayed in Montreal. Munro and his Maroons, who were at Madison Square Garden as spectators, kept the trophy in Montreal, winning the 1926 NHL title and the last inter-league Stanley Cup.

Much more was decided that December 1925 day than who possessed the Prince of Wales Trophy. The NHL was transformed forever. If they weren't already, the beckoning bright lights of Broadway and dollar signs of Wall Street would forever be part of pro hockey.

From 1927 to 1938, the Prince of Wales Trophy was given to the winner of the American Division. From 1938 to 1967, it was presented to the NHL's regular-season champion. Since expansion in 1967, the trophy has been awarded to a division or conference champion for the regular season or playoffs. Most recently, since 1993-94, it's served as the title trophy for the Eastern Conference playoff champ.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSH CASPER

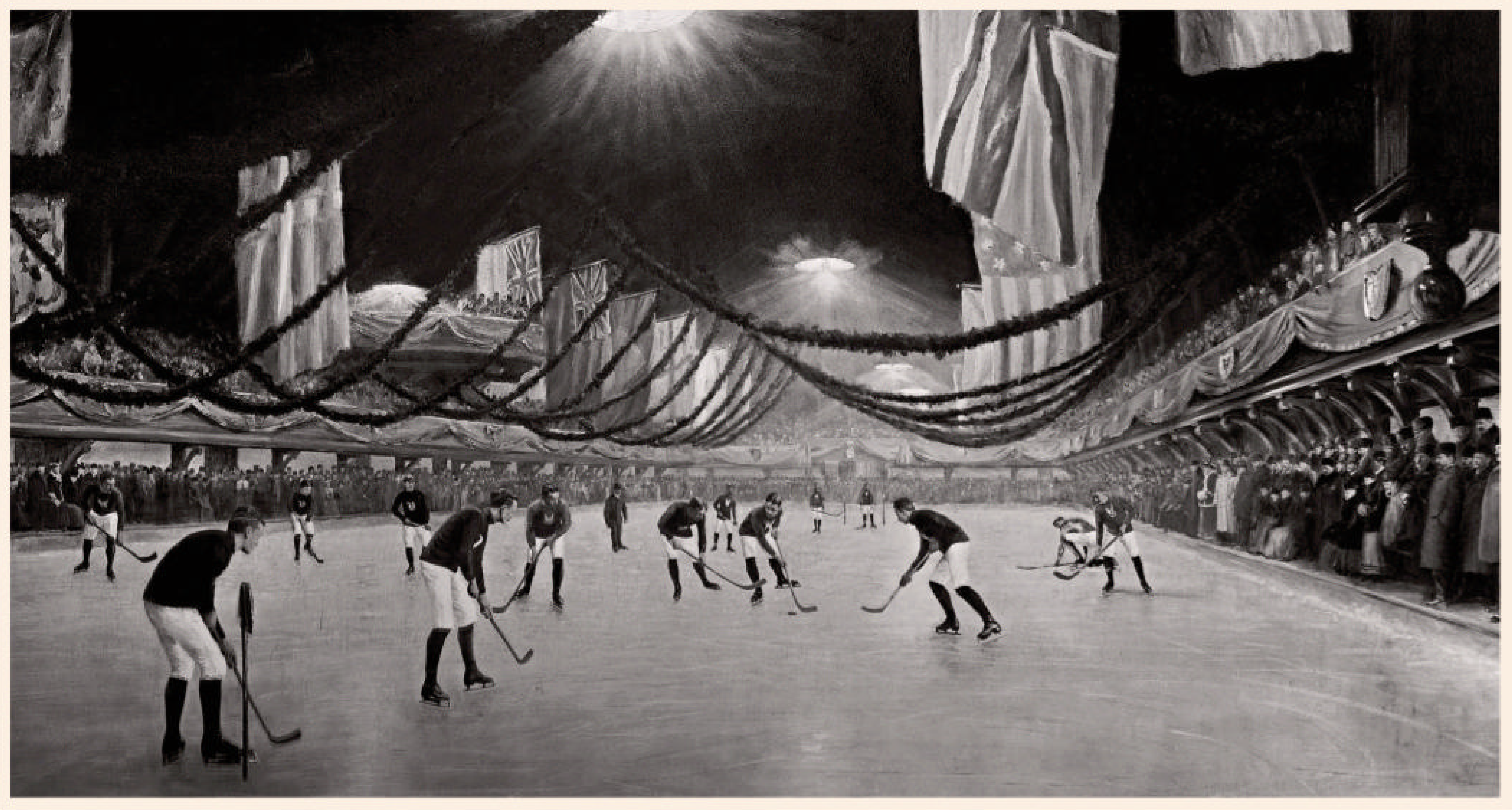


PHOTO BY ARCHIVES CANADA

THE FORGOTTEN FIRST GAME

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST INDOOR HOCKEY GAME CAME AND WENT WITH BARELY A WHISPER OF RECOGNITION TO MARK THE OCCASION. AND THAT'S TOO BAD BECAUSE IT WAS A MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO RECOGNIZE A 'FOUNDING FATHER' OF THE GAME IN JAMES CREIGHTON

BY RONNIE SHUKER

WHENEVER THE HOCKEY RINK and the political arena collide, the result usually isn't a net win for the game. Politics rarely plays well with the puck. Such has been the nearly two-decade fallout from an announcement back on May 22, 2008, when political and hockey dignitaries joined forces for a ceremony at the Bell Centre in Montreal.

It had all the pomp and circumstance of an official government photo-op. Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper was there, alongside senator Michael Fortier. Representing the game were International Ice Hockey Federation president Rene Fasel, Montreal Canadiens president Pierre Boivin and Hockey Canada president Bob Nicholson, as well as officials from the Society for International Hockey Research and Hockey Heritage Montreal.

In hand were two historic plaques: a bronze one commemorated the old Victoria Skating Rink, where the world's first indoor hockey game was played on March 3, 1875; the other honored the game's organizer, James George Aylwin Creighton.

"James Creighton and the Victoria Rink are a part of our pasts we can't forget," said Nicholson to the gathered crowd. "To unveil these plaques at the Bell Centre around the Montreal Canadiens is something very special."

At the time, the Canadiens were preparing to celebrate their centennial anniversary, and the plaque honoring Creighton was to be put on permanent display at the Bell Centre and given a "prominent place in the building," according to Boivin. The plaque commemorating the game was to be put up near the location of the old Victoria Skating Rink, long since turned into a parking garage after several other iterations following the rink's demolition in 1937.

Neither was ever installed. In-

PREMIÈRE PARTIE OFFICIELLE
DE HOCKEY SUR GLACE
Québec

The Quebec government unveiled a plaque in the only public celebration of indoor hockey's 150th anniversary.

stead, they went from a storage room in the bowels of the Bell Centre to a storage room at Parks Canada, where they remain today, leaving the plaques, and all they represent, to collect historical dust. Not even hockey's 150th anniversary was enough to grease the gears to get the plaques installed as Harper and company had intended back in 2008.

When modern hockey's 150th birthday rolled around on March 3, 2025, few beyond hockey's historians knew about it. Even fewer recognized it. The NHL was silent, and the Canadiens, usually the league's foremost franchise when it comes to honoring tradition and respecting hockey history, did nothing despite hosting a game that night against the Buffalo Sabres at the Bell Centre, just a weak wrist shot away from the site of where the old Victoria Skating Rink once stood at 49 Drummond Street.

GAME ON

The first indoor game was played at the Victoria Skating Rink in Montreal in 1875.

For the Canadiens, it was a missed opportunity, not only to honor an important piece of hockey history but also to sell some jerseys. The day didn't warrant an elaborate ceremony or even an in-game announcement, but the players could've worn replica jerseys, even just during warmups, or had a patch stitched in place of the RBC logo that sullies one of hockey's most iconic uniforms.

Instead, the anniversary of the game came and went with barely a whisper from the hockey world, while Creighton probably rolled over in his grave.

A Maritimer from Halifax, Creighton grew up playing the game outdoors back when hockey had yet to find its own way out of its stick-and-ball forbearers like hurley, wicket, ricket, shinty, shinny, bandy and baggataway. There is still some debate among historians, but most generally agree that hockey as we know it finally evolved enough to branch off on its own when Creighton organized that first indoor game at the Victoria Skating Rink. Two years later, he cemented his place in history by captaining the world's first organized hockey team, the McGill University Hockey Club, and publishing what became known as the "Montreal Rules" that same year in his role as secretary of the Metropolitan Club of Montreal.

"It's doubly appropriate that we're honoring him here in Montreal, because this is where he organized the first indoor hockey game," said Harper to those at the ceremony. "Creighton is the closest thing hockey has to a founding father."

Like Harper, Creighton had one foot in politics and the other in hockey. Creighton's official career spanned nearly 50 years as a law clerk for the Senate. On the ice, he played for the Rideau Rebels, a local team that helped popularize the game in Ontario in the late 19th century. He even played with the governor general, Lord Stanley himself, before Stanley donated his now-eponymous trophy. But it was that first game, on March 3, 1875, that Creighton is remembered for, as both a player and an organizer.

About 40 spectators watched the game on an eight-inch-high platform above ice level. Many of the players were students at McGill. Creighton captained one of the teams, which featured a wooden disk rather than the usual lacrosse ball, marking the progenitor of the modern hockey puck. *The Gazette* promoted the event in advance and then reported on the game itself: "The match was an interesting and well-contested affair, the efforts of the players exciting much merriment as they wheeled and dodged each other."

The game was divided into two halves and played with nine men per side, with the "nets" composed of two flags placed about eight feet apart. Creighton's team won 2-1. Perhaps prescient of how hockey would evolve, the game ended in a brawl, when players clashed with members of the rink's skating club, who did not take kindly to sharing the ice with players of this infernal new sport, a fact *The Gazette* chose to omit in its post-game wrap-up but one that the *British Whig-Standard* newspaper, in Kingston, Ont., included in its account two days later: "A disgraceful sight took place at Montreal in the Victoria Rink over a game of hockey. Shins and heads were battered, benches smashed, and the lady spectators fled in confusion."

When Creighton died in 1930, at the age of 80, former Canadian prime minister Robert Borden attended his funeral. For nearly 80 years, Creighton's grave at Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa remained unmarked, until Harper unveiled a gravestone and a separate plaque at the cemetery in a ceremony in 2009. With his grave now marked, all that remains is for Creighton to be given his rightful place in hockey history by the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto. For years, SIHR has been trying to right this wrong, but the omission remains.

This has long been how hockey history is written. If a seminal moment or mover falls beyond the purview of the NHL, their place in the annals of the larger game is mostly ignored, until it is eventually forgotten altogether.

It doesn't have to be this way. There is a reason why this magazine you're reading is called The Hockey News and not The NHL News. The NHL is indeed the peak of the hockey world, but a mountain is much greater than its summit. There's plenty of room and opportunity to mark milestones along the way up to the top.

As the anniversary passed, the only real recognition of hockey's first game came from the Quebec government, which designated it a historic event as part of legislation making hockey the province's official sport. And about the only word from any dark corner of the NHL came from four-time Stanley Cup champion Yvon Lambert, who played eight seasons with the Canadiens in the 1970s and was on hand for the announcement.

"It's great for Montreal. It's great for Quebec," he said. "We, Quebecers, are proud of that first hockey game here, in 1875. We should be proud of that. We shouldn't be embarrassed to talk about it."

To mark the day, Quebec's minister of sport, Isabelle Charest, unveiled a mock-up of a commemorative plaque to honor the game. According to reports, the plaque is to be installed in the area where the Victoria Skating Rink once stood…after discussions with the city of Montreal.

Somewhere, another storage room is waiting to receive it. H

PHOTO COURTESY OF GOVERNMENT OF QUEBEC

RAY BOURQUE & **WAYNE GRETZKY**

NHL

THE GREAT STATS ‘CONSPIRACY’

For someone whose love of the game was ignited by stats, finding out the NHL was rewriting its history was a mystery that needed to be solved **BY SHANE FRASER**

I GOT INTO HOCKEY NOT through hockey but through hockey stats.

Despite being a boy in frozen Saskatchewan, bad skating and good parenting left my dreams unclaimed by the NHL. Open to other opportunities unlike my skate-shackled friends, I read and drew and ignored hockey until the sport appeared in glorious abstract on the back of a trading card.

GP. G. A. PTS. PIM. +/-. Each atop a column of seemingly random numbers. Eight-year-old me realized if he decoded those symbols, he could contextualize the numbers and explain the iridescent player on the front. I learned that GP means games played, that G (goals) + A (assists) = PTS (points), that PIM denotes time served for penalties rather than penalties themselves. And, since this predated advanced analytics, I reached the peak of statistical understanding by deciphering plus/minus. Of Corsi, I knew nothing, but I knew that Chris Pronger was on the ice for 52 more goals for than goals against in 1999-2000, giving him a plus-52.

With thousands more cards to collect, including those for goalies, with their own W-L-T-SO-GAA categories, I explored a universe with lore dating back to 1917 and dynamism rivalling Middle-earth or even the ‘Marvelverse.’

Fittingly, the *NHL Official Guide & Record Books* became my guide in the NHL Extended Universe. After much exploration, I began watching games and playing non-ice hockey, recording my and others’ stats. I made my own sports cards. I created my own shoebox universes with reams of stats for pretend players and teams. I ended up a trivia whiz, memorizing stats and records like Tiger Williams leading all NHLers with 3,966 PIM.

Decades later, after I had grown from a fantasy statistician to a real-life writer, I happened upon Tiger’s stats. His record still stood, but it had changed. It read 3,971.

“Had my memory failed me?” I wondered. “Did other hockey nerds remember 3,966? Was this a Jonathan Bernier-hijacked Mandela Effect?”

I searched Google and found a single tweeter who recalled the same discrepancy but offered no proof. Then, I opened my *NHL Official Guide & Record Book* from 2006 and *Total NHL* from 2003. In both, Williams was listed with 3,966 PIM.

Tiger, who hadn’t played an NHL game since 1988, had somehow gained five penalty minutes. While some might think Tiger is so fierce he got a fighting major in retirement, I didn’t buy it. And he’s far from the only historic player with altered stats.

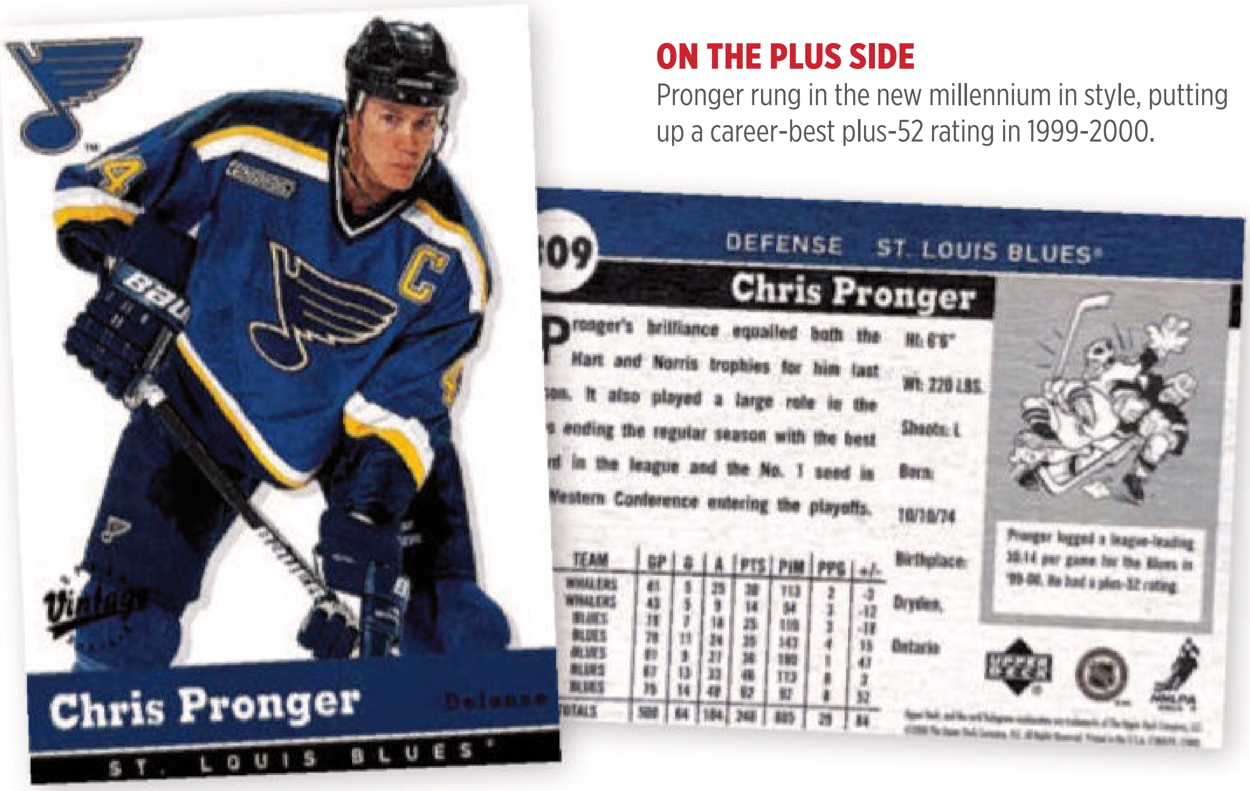
George Armstrong gained a game, going from 1,187 to 1,188. Tim Horton lost a game, going from 1,446 to 1,445. Mark Messier gained two penalty minutes. Jean Beliveau gained four. Bryan Trottier lost two playoff assists. Joe Malone gained a regular-season assist. Aurel Joliat went from 270-190-460 to 269-194-463. Maurice ‘Rocket’ Richard gained a regular-season assist, two regular-season penalty minutes and lost a playoff game. My old dusty books revealed that many (most?) players’ stats had changed in the decades since they retired or died.

The NHL had rewritten history.

It’s a softer Big Brother, sure. You might even call it 10-ply. But like a totalitarian regime, the NHL covertly dynamited a bedrock concept. Sharing a root with “static,” stats, as they exist in sports, are considered unchanging, objective measures of athleticism – frozen in time for future generations to admire. The league, it seemed, had ex-

ON THE PLUS SIDE

Pronger rung in the new millennium in style, putting up a career-best plus-52 rating in 1999-2000.



PORTER BINKS/USA TODAY NETWORK

posed its fossils to harmful elements and hoped scrupulous fans wouldn't notice.

Though nefariously altering ancient stats would be unprecedented, statskeeping scandals pervade other sports. Nick Van Exel's 23-assist game was embellished by a disgruntled NBA statskeeper, who, in a different game, claimed he was ordered by management to give Hakeem Olajuwon a triple-double.

Statistical revisionism outrages fans and victimizes players. Giving Olajuwon an unearned 10th block could knock another legend off the leaderboards or out of the record books.

One legendary victim was Terry Sawchuk. Long the NHL leader in career goalie wins, Sawchuk had his total wins dropped from 447 when he died in 1970 to 445 sometime after 2006. Because his record was eventually broken in legitimate play, said revisionism didn't affect his standing, but it changed the date of his dethroning.

Patrick Roy and the wider NHLverse rejoiced when Roy supposedly passed Sawchuk's total on Oct. 17, 2000. During the post-game ceremony, Roy cut a piece from the net for the Hockey Hall of Fame before celebrating on his teammates' shoulders. But that achievement and display need asterisks. Per what is now published, Roy passed Sawchuk two games earlier, on Oct. 12, 2000. Of course, no one celebrated then.

colorado avalanche
patrick roy
goaltender
patrick roy
career stats
Patrick finished the 2001-02 season with the most shutouts and the lowest GAA. He was awarded the Jennings Trophy for the fifth time, the most by a goaltender in NHL history.
95
Pacific

WIN DID THAT HAPPEN, AGAIN?
As it turns out, the hockey world celebrated Roy breaking the all-time wins record a few days late.

In solidarity with stats purists and asterisked puckists, I reached out to the NHL. My first inquiry went unanswered. While awaiting – with little hope – a response to the second, I sought to explain the disparities myself. The aforementioned tweeter mentioned a time when the NHL had reviewed game summaries dating to the league's inception. Whispers of such an audit survived on message boards but, at first search, not in mainstream media. Buried by the algorithm, however, was an NHL.com article from 2017 on the digitization of NHL stats. As part of its centennial celebration, the NHL put at "your fingertips" a hundred years of "history that used to be stored only in a small, nondescript room at the league office in Toronto." But while doing so, it made many changes to the statistical record. "They literally were rewriting the history books," wrote author Nicholas J. Cotsonika, saying the quiet part out loud.

Following that revelation and another ignored inquiry, a more direct line to the NHL bore fruit. Russell Levine, group VP of statistics and information, confirmed the 2017 project and produced a press release issued at the time. That release, combined with Cotsonika's article, dynamited my assumption of statistical evildoing.

There was no Infinity Stone-wielding supervillain deleting half the stats in the NHLverse. Instead, there was a superhero named Benny Ercolani, who led the NHL's stats department for 37 years, six of which were spent correcting past mistakes.

From 2011 to 2017, Ercolani and his team of stat-vengers digitized more than 24,000 game sheets while fixing errors from a pre-computerized period.

Before 1971, NHL stats were compiled by hand. And even when the league's Montreal office got a computer, it was housed in an accounting firm blocks away. Then-statistician Ron Andrews recalled, after spending a Sunday night at the computer, walking to the office and losing – albeit temporarily – a stats tape to a snowstorm. By the mid-1980s, NHL stats had gone digital. But this meant there were roughly 70 years of windblown and coffee-stained records for Ercolani's team to audit.

Perhaps it was fatigue – or farsightedness – that caused Richard's assist on Nov. 4, 1945, to be miscredited, in the NHL's official ledger, to Butch Bouchard. Ercolani's team corrected it, taking an assist from Bouchard and giving it to Richard. By the end of the audit, Ercolani's team had made over 6,000 corrections. Approximately 1,100 were to players' penalty-minute totals (Williams being the most notable), 650 to games-played totals, 370 to assist totals and 100 to goal totals. The rest were to lesser stats. Among the biggest winners were Jari Kurri, who gained five power-play goals, and Wayne Gretzky, who gained plus-2 in 1984-85 to become the third NHL player to eclipse plus-100 in a single season.

Regarding the biggest losers, the NHL wouldn't comment. In fact, just when I thought this would be a puff piece on NHL statskeeping, the league ceased contact. It wouldn't say whether historic alterations are still happening or have happened outside that audit period (Levine had earlier stated that "most" happened during the audit). It wouldn't say if another audit is scheduled. It wouldn't say how it computed the three to four assists that were given to single goals in the 1930s or the rumored half-point assists doled out in the 1910s.

Most importantly, it wouldn't say if the league should have done more to publicize historic changes, such as by issuing corrections to player profiles like editors do to newspaper articles.

But the final unanswered question was whether others had expressed confusion about the 6,000-ish discrepancies between old stats and new.

Though minor confusions and deceptions remain, NHL statistics are a shot of reality. Getting into hockey the "wrong" way – via a neat, numerical box on a dazzling card – elevated stats as perfect depictions of a sport where, at its core, bladed brutes push a vulcanized slab through blood, sweat and ice for brief respite in a net. Making sense of this maelstrom are other brutes – press box anthropologists as flawed as the subjects they study. Since hockey is a game of inches, so too is statskeeping. Even in a rapidly digitizing age, when on-ice technology like the EDGE system generates nearly a million 3D data points per game, tired eyes and slippery fingers are the difference between penalty and pardon, goal and save, win and loss. One missed keystroke can taint the record until Ercolani 2.0 arrives. Perhaps it'll be an AI program that eliminates human error for good. Until then, stats, even those recorded over a century ago, can change. Such changes don't just improve accuracy, they reaffirm humanity as imperfect but endlessly commendable in its relentless pursuit of perfection.

The Great NHL Stats Conspiracy was great indeed.

SETTLED SCEPTRE
Miller attributes some of her success in Year 2 to being more comfortable with her team and the style of play.

HEATHER POLLOCK/PWHL

TORONTO SCEPTRES

BACK WITH A BANG

In her second season after spending a half-decade in China, relative unknown Hannah Miller was wearing the PWHL's scoring crown for the Sceptres **BY IAN KENNEDY**

LOOKING AT THE PWHL'S scoring leaders as the league crossed the midway point of its second season, it wasn't a familiar name like Marie-Philip Poulin, Kendall Coyne Schofield, Hilary Knight or Sarah Fillier sitting atop the ladder. Instead, it was 29-year-old Toronto Sceptre Hannah Miller.

Miller was not a household name in women's hockey coming into the league. She'd spent the past five seasons playing in China with Shenzhen before the inaugural PWHL season in 2023-24. That's quickly changing, however, as she's emerged as a dominant power forward.

"Obviously, it feels good," Miller said. "I try not to look at stats too much. A lot of times, you can think you didn't have that good of a game and you have points on the scoresheet. Or, lots of times, vice versa, you have a really good game, but other little plays are happening and you don't get on the scoresheet."

Miller's value has skyrocketed this season as stars Natalie Spooner and Sarah Nurse, two of the three Toronto players who finished ahead of Miller in scoring last year when she finished 19th overall, have missed considerable time with injuries. But Miller's success isn't a surprise to everyone. Sceptres coach Troy Ryan sees her breakout year as the product of her attention to detail and ability to play anywhere he puts her. "She has simply built off the solid foundation she established last season," Ryan said. "She has played all three forward positions and has played with many different line combinations, and she hasn't missed a beat. She's been able to do this because she's confident in who she is as a player, the value she brings to our team, and she plays the right way."

Miller has been doing things the right way, quietly, throughout her career. The 5-foot-9 North Vancouver product won back-to-back gold medals representing Canada at the U-18 World Championship, including as an alternate captain in her second tournament. She followed that with a successful NCAA career at St. Lawrence University. Then, it was off to China to play for KRS Shenzhen – with a brief stint in Sweden with Djurgarden – and to represent China at the World Championship and Olympic Games as a dual-passport player. In China, Miller found a professional wage, support staff and an opportunity to open her eyes to the world and grow as a person and player.

Since then, she's continued placing building blocks into her game each season. That included last year, as she adapted to the PWHL. Now, she's putting those lessons into action as a league leader. "Every season and every off-season, you're looking to build," Miller said. "Although I'm an older player and have been playing outside of college for a while now, last year was the first year of this league for everyone no matter if you were younger or older. I think there was kind of that feeling out period of what our game was going to look like, and being on a new team with new teammates, new staff and everything like that. When you come into Year 2, everything is a little bit more comfortable, and I think that can help."

After being away from home for so long, Miller has embraced the opportunity to play in North America again, including in front of friends and family at the PWHL Takeover Tour stop in Vancouver. It was a full-circle moment, as her family, who have only seen her play live a few times in the past six seasons, saw Miller playing professionally in front of 19,038 fans at Rogers Arena.

When she graduated from St. Lawrence, Miller simply wanted to prolong her career. She had no long-term goal in mind. Now, playing in the world's best league, she sees a future and a path forward to continue improving, and, if this season is any indication, thriving as one of the PWHL's superstars. "It's been a great experience for me as a player so far," Miller said. "I'm continuing to learn and keep developing and adding things to my game." H

TORONTO SCEPTRES

FAST FACTS

Toronto's do-it-all defender has hit another level this year, adding more weapons to her ever-growing arsenal **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

WHEN THE TORONTO Sceptres met the Montreal Victoire for the second stop of the PWHL's 2025 Takeover Tour in January, Sceptres alternate captain Renata Fast was playing in Vancouver for the first time since a Rivalry Series game with Team Canada at Rogers Arena in early 2020.

She still remembered it well. "It was an incredible atmosphere," Fast said. "I have a really strong memory of sitting on the bench and looking around. The lights were dimmed, and there were lights flashing everywhere. I thought, 'It's so incredible to be able to play in these NHL buildings.' "

Fast-forward five years, and NHL arenas are now a regular feature on the PWHL circuit. The Minnesota Frost and New York Sirens are based out of the Xcel Energy Center and Prudential Center, respectively. The Sceptres and Victoire have sold out the NHL barns in their hometowns. And the league has drawn NHL-sized crowds to neutral-site games in multiple markets, including sellouts in Vancouver and Edmonton.

Last year, with a record-setting 21,105 fans in attendance, Fast set up Sarah Nurse's OT-winner at the Bell Centre in Montreal. "It's pretty cool to see just how much of an impact this league is having," Fast said.

Growing up, Fast was a multi-sport athlete who kept her options open. The 5-foot-7 native of Burlington, Ont., played basketball and volleyball – among other sports – and she was recruited to play NCAA soccer before committing to Clarkson University for hockey.

As a sophomore, she was part of the Golden Knights' first national championship in 2014. After graduation, she joined the CWHL's Toronto Furies. The team played out of Etobicoke's 1,000-seat Mastercard Centre, and a walk-up fan wouldn't have had any trouble snagging a ticket on game day.

The facility is now known as the Ford Performance Centre. It's the practice facility for the Maple Leafs and AHL Marlies as well as the Sceptres, who upgraded their game-day rink from the 2,600-seat Mattamy Athletic Centre to the 8,140-seat Coca-Cola Coliseum for Season 2 – and they're having no trouble filling the place. "Mattamy was an awesome place to play in for the first season, but I think we definitely outgrew that building," Fast said. "To be able to be in Coca-Cola, the fan engagement is so great with what they're able to do for the atmosphere on the big Jumbotron. It's awesome."

FAST AND CURIOUS

The Sceptres are glad she ended up choosing hockey, but Fast tried her hand at many sports growing up.

TOP: BJORN FRANKE/PWHL; MIDDLE: JAMIE DOUGLAS/PWHL

In Year 1, Toronto led the PWHL in both scoring and goals against. But the pride that came with a first-place finish in the regular-season standings was extinguished by a Round 1 upset at the hands of Minnesota.

Without 2023-24 MVP Natalie Spooner for the first half of this season, the Sceptres leaned on their power play for offense, with Fast frequently assuming the quarterback position. Historically more of a shutdown defender, Fast led the league with nine power-play points in 15 games midway through the season, and she ranked second among defenders in assists (10) and points (13).

Fast, aptly enough, is one of the PWHL's best skaters. At 30, she's an all-situations player who led the league in average ice time at mid-season, coming in at 24:07 per game. And the physical style that the PWHL is making its trademark is perfect for her. Fast ranks among the league leaders in hits, blocked shots and penalty minutes.

As a member of Canada's Olympic teams in 2018 and 2022 and a six-time World Championship medallist, Fast has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with her Sceptres coach, Troy Ryan.

Ryan has been at the helm of Canada's national team since 2020 after starting as an assistant in 2016-17, the same year Fast made her debut at the worlds. "I feel so fortunate to be able to have had Troy as a coach for so long," she said. "I remember him at a development camp when I was with the under-22 with Team Canada, him sitting in on one of my 1-on-1 meetings and hearing his feedback on me as a player. That was, probably, 2015? He always has new information to share, and he has a consistent demeanor every day he comes to the rink. I love to be coached by him, and I think our relationship has definitely evolved over all those years."

BOSTON FLEET

MOVING ON UP

Shay Maloney flew under the radar at the 2024 PWHL draft, but she's quickly proving to be a perfect stylistic fit for the rough-and-tumble league **BY IAN KENNEDY**

WHEN THE BOSTON FLEET made Shay Maloney their sixth-round pick in the 2024 PWHL draft, it was far from a guarantee she would earn a roster spot – with few roles available in a six-team league awash with talent. But as she entered the second half of 2024-25, Maloney was defying the odds.

The 25-year-old rookie center knew the deck was stacked against her, but it was hard to miss Maloney this pre-season, as she was seemingly hitting everything that moved. When Maloney talks about the physical side of her game, she can't help but smile and laugh. It's a part of the sport she loves. "I've always been that kind of gritty type of player," Maloney said. "I have a big body, and it plays to my strengths in that area. When the league was created and that was an element of the game, it was definitely something that excited me because it kind of fits into my playing style."

Maloney played three seasons at Brown University, spending her final year there as captain, then transferred to Quinnipiac as a senior for 2022-23. After moving on from the NCAA, Maloney didn't go directly to the PWHL, instead honing her game with Leksand in Sweden. As she watched PWHL games with her teammates overseas, they often discussed the fledgling league's physicality. Although the SDHL reintroduced bodychecking in 2022-23, the consensus was the PWHL brought another level of physicality, and there was also less time and space on smaller North American rinks.

Maloney knew the transition to the SDHL, however, was beneficial. "I would definitely say it was a steppingstone," she said. "It kind of got me into that new mindset of shifting from college, where there is no hitting, to that element where there is hitting. I had the opportunity to go through that learning phase in Sweden, which helped me transition into the PWHL to bring that physicality."

Maloney, however, is more than just a checking-line player. Despite having a productive senior NCAA season with Quinnipiac, where she put up 31 points in 40 games, Maloney didn't score as often in Sweden.

Coming into this season, many tabbed her for similar duties in Boston, but Maloney has provided some offensive punch and has climbed the depth chart as a result. In fact, she's often found herself playing alongside some of the Fleet's biggest stars, including captain Hilary Knight.

"Five years ago, if you had told me I'd be playing with Hilary Knight, I don't think I would have believed you," Maloney said. "Every single day, I'm so grateful for the opportunity to skate alongside such incredible athletes and athletes that have so much on their resume and have accomplished so many things. It's something I'll forever be grateful for, and I'll never, ever take that for granted."

Maloney has made the most of her opportunity in Boston, and others are beginning to notice. Maloney often draws her teammates' praise, and as Boston coach Courtney Kessel says, if Maloney continues to progress as she has, it won't be long before others take note as well.

"She's someone that continues to grow with confidence in her ability, with her size and speed," Kessel said. "This league was built for people like her. If she continues to grow, I'd love to see her get a look at the national team. She's a smart, 200-foot hockey player, and she just continues to grow every single day with us. She started on our fourth line but kept with it, and we're just seeing her continue to grab more ice time. And she's earning every second."

All the while, the Illinois product continues to make the most of those moments. From when she steps on the ice until she takes off her skates, each shift is a chance for Maloney to prove herself in the world's top league, and so far, she's done that and more.

"I knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me," Maloney said. "And I just wanted to seize the moment and take advantage of every time I was on the ice and kind of make my mark in that regard, put everything out there every single shift I had and see what happens. It's been incredible. It's more than anything I could've ever imagined." H

TOP: HEATHER POLLOCK/PWHL; MIDDLE: PHOTO BY BOSTON FLEET

OTTAWA CHARGE

PROVIDING A CHARGE

Tereza Vanisova consistently provides Ottawa – and the team's fans – with a shot in the arm, whether it's through her physical play or a timely goal **BY IAN KENNEDY**

YEAR ONE IN THE PWHL didn't go as planned for Tereza Vanisova. After PWHL Montreal picked her in the seventh round of the league's inaugural draft, Vanisova spent the bulk of the season fighting for first place in the standings with Montreal. That all changed when Vanisova found herself part of the PWHL's first-ever trade-deadline-day deal.

Montreal sent Vanisova to Ottawa for Amanda Boulier, and the result was Montreal being swept in the first round of the post-season and Ottawa sliding out of a playoff spot entirely. But with the security of spending a full season in the same jersey this year, Vanisova has thrived with the Ottawa Charge. "Last year was kind of hard for me with the trade situation," she said. "It's hard changing teams basically at the end of the season. But, obviously, I'm happy I could start for Ottawa this season at the beginning of the season. It's definitely helpful."

Vanisova has added comfort in Ottawa playing under coach Carla MacLeod – who is also her bench boss with Czechia's senior national team – and alongside Czech teammates Aneta Tejralova and Katerina Mrazova. As the PWHL season passed its midway point, Vanisova was showing her comfort, as the Strakonice native was leading the Charge in goals and points. "Sometimes things are going your way and sometimes not," Vanisova said. "Obviously, getting used to this league is also a huge aspect of it. Last year, it was the first season and everything was new. Now, you get used to playing this game this way. I've been working really hard over the summer, which may also be one of the factors."

Ottawa sees the value as well. Vanisova has played predominantly on Ottawa's left side this season, but she's been versatile enough to play a hard-hitting checking-line role or move up and utilize her skill and speed on the top line. "Obviously, her goals and scoring have been critical for us," said Ottawa GM Mike Hirshfeld. "But her compete and energy level bring a toughness and edginess to our group that is necessary to be successful in this league."

Before Vanisova joined the PWHL, she scored the Isobel Cup-clinching goal for the PHF's Toronto Six. She's since become a fan favorite in Ottawa due to her combination of skill and tenacity. "I really enjoy playing physical, but it's just hockey," Vanisova said. "I still want to play with the puck. It's not like I just want to be a physical player, but for me, it's always been part of hockey."

Vanisova continues to be one of the top-scoring players in the PWHL – and one of the most penalized. Fans have recognized both. This season, after Vanisova received her second career fine by the PWHL safety committee, Charge fans wanted to bail her out. Instead, they decided that, for each goal she scores this season, they would donate $13 (representing Vanisova's jersey number) to the Capital City Condors. The Condors are an adaptive hockey program for youth with physical or cognitive disabilities, and they have the only all-girls adaptive program in the world.

Quickly, Charge fans had surpassed $3,000 in donations. While Vanisova still plans to play a physical brand of hockey, it's given her even more motivation to put the puck in the net. It also gives her even more appreciation for one of the PWHL's most dedicated fan bases. "It's amazing," Vanisova said. "I'm grateful for that. It's great. Ottawa's fan base is amazing, and we're very fortunate to have such amazing fans. I'm trying even more to score.

"They've been amazing. They always show up. Even when we've been losing or not playing that well, they're always there for us. They've been very engaging with us, and it's special compared to other teams. What can I say, they've been very good."

Vanisova has another special moment with fans ahead, as she'll play in front of family and friends this spring when Czechia hosts the Women's World Championship for the first time. She's an example of the global growth of women's hockey, and she is quickly becoming a fan favorite – on both sides of the Atlantic. A medal on home soil would be the icing on the cake after an already memorable season. "We're all excited about the tournament," Vanisova said. "All my family are going to support. All my friends are coming to watch. Hopefully, we're going to do well. It would mean so much. That's what we're working for. It would just be a special moment for all of us." H

TOP: JOSH KIM/OTTAWA CHARGE; MIDDLE: PHOTO BY PWHL

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HERSHEY BEARS

CALL OF THE CALDER

With a chance at a three-peat this spring, coach Todd Nelson and his Hershey Bears could be at the mercy of their own (highly) successful player development **BY DILLON COLLINS**

IT HAS BEEN SIXTY-THREE years since an AHL team has three-peated as Calder Cup champions. Not since Springfield accomplished the feat under legendary coach Pat Egan in the early 1960s has a club won three straight AHL crowns.

But with an AHL-record 13 league titles and a sparkling 16-5 home record over the past two post-seasons, the Hershey Bears have the makeup and experience to run the table and make history this season. “You can’t look too far ahead, but I said from the first day of training camp, it’s our goal to win a Calder Cup,” said Hershey coach Todd Nelson. “It’s everybody’s goal. But when you’re here in Hershey, it’s not just the goal or something you strive for, it’s an expectation.”

On paper, Hershey has the key ingredients for yet another long and fruitful playoff run. Coach Nelson is a four-time Calder Cup champion – winning once as an assistant and three times as the leading man behind the bench – and a two-time Colonial Cup champion in the United League. And much of the roster from the 2023-24 run – including key pieces Pierrick Dube, Ivan Miroshnichenko, Michael Sgarbossa, Alex Limoges and the goaltending tandem of Hunter Shepard and Clay Stevenson – has returned.

However, even the best-laid plans can be quickly dashed in the AHL, where clubs are at the mercy of injury and frequent NHL call-ups. “You know what? It’s tough,” Nelson said. “I’ve coached in the National Hockey League as an interim head coach and also as an assistant. And, hey, it’s the best league in the world. It’s a tough league to coach. Very brilliant coaches out there and tacticians with their system work. But I think it’s tougher to coach in the AHL. I truly do, just because of all the movement. I can get a phone call tonight or tomorrow morning saying you’re losing a couple of your guys to Washington and all the stuff you worked on over the past couple of days kind of goes out the window.”

Therein lies the rub. Rejuvenated with prospects and buoyed by captain Alex Ovechkin and his chase of Wayne Gretzky’s all-time goal-scoring record, the Washington Capitals are one of the NHL’s success stories of 2024-25. That means the Bears could see some key contributors get pilfered come playoff time.

COACH’S CHALLENGE
Nelson, who has coached at the NHL level, says heading the bench is even more difficult in the AHL.

Though the primary edict for finely run organizations like Hershey remains to develop prospects, icing a competitive team year in and year out is also vital. “We’re very proud of the players that we’ve graduated to Washington and seeing them perform well,” Nelson said. “Our primary job is to develop players for the National Hockey League, but also in the case of working with Hershey, we have an obligation to the people of Hershey to win hockey games with the rich history here.

“So, you can do both. You can develop and win at the same time. And, quite honestly, I think winning is a form of development. Our philosophy in this organization is to get players playing deep in the playoffs, so when they get the chance to go and play in the Stanley Cup playoffs, it’s not foreign to them. They’ve played those high-pressure games. They know how to handle it.”

Now, staring down a shot at the second-ever AHL three-peat, Nelson and Co. have to dig deep and buckle up for the rigors of the gruelling post-season tournament. “I consider the playoffs to be something really special,” Nelson said. “It’s a time that defines a player. You have certain players that play well in the regular season, but they take it to a whole different level in the playoffs.

“It’s a proud organization. Washington’s a very proud organization. You know, that’s our goal. It’d be fantastic if the Washington Capitals could raise the Stanley Cup and we can raise the Calder Cup again.”

TOP: PHOTO BY HERSHEY BEARS; MIDDLE: ANDY ABEYTA/THE DESERT SUN

SYRACUSE CRUNCH

A LESSON IN FAITH

Brandon Halverson's journey to the NHL has been fraught with peril. But at a time when he could've given up on his dream, he found strength in a higher power **BY DILLON COLLINS**

THE ROAD TO THE NHL is paved with adversity for all those who grow up with Stanley Cup aspirations. But for Brandon Halverson, his road was fitted with even more bumps and forks than most.

There were the demotions, the cuts and the stint playing overseas. There were whole seasons lost to injury. All that hardship is what made it so surprising to so many when the Tampa Bay Lightning inked Halverson to a two-year contract Feb. 3. Surprising to everyone but Halverson, that is.

For Halverson, who turns 29 March 29, faith and determination have steered him head-on to this moment. "There was a small part of me that kind of knew that this was going to happen," Halverson said. "And I don't want that to sound cocky, but you have to trick your mind. You have to tell yourself things and put them out there in the universe for it to happen sometimes. It's like what you say about yourself is what's true. It's like manifesting. I manifested the hell out of this."

The New York Rangers drafted the native of Traverse City, Mich., 59th overall in 2014, but Halverson struggled to find his footing in the organization. He mostly bounced between the ECHL and AHL while on his entry-level contract, making one NHL appearance in relief in February 2018. When Halverson's ELC expired after 2018-19, the Rangers chose not to give him a qualifying offer. So began a five-year journey of injury and uncertainty.

Halverson can still recall the moment he tore his meniscus during training camp with the ECHL's Wheeling Nailers in 2020. He'd previously torn the meniscus in his other knee while still in the Rangers' organization as a member of AHL Hartford, so he was familiar with what the injury entailed. He decided he'd play through it. "The year before, I had left the season towards the end and then COVID hit and the season got pushed back," Halverson said. "So, there's no way I'm just missing this whole year. I'll do my rehab for two weeks and get back on the ice, tape it up and just play through it."

If only it were that easy. Halverson recalls having to punch his knee to straighten it out mid-play, as it would regularly feel like it was popping out of place. He made it through four games that way. Then he sustained a severe high-ankle sprain when an attacker landed on him after coming in on a breakaway.

The setback could have derailed him. In the past, maybe it would have. "Once I realized my season was over (and) I had to get surgery, I kind of had a 'coming to God' moment where the old me would fall into a really deep depression and be very down," Halverson said. "And it was a moment that was very eye-opening for me that God was doing this to me. He's doing it to me, but I saw it in the most positive way. He's doing this to teach me and make me value life and understand that this isn't that bad. Things could be so much worse."

Halverson took on jobs outside of hockey to make ends meet while he was injured, but he never lost faith. He spent 2022-23 in Germany's second division before landing with ECHL Orlando ahead of 2023-24. It was there that he began his rise through the ranks of the Lightning organization. "There were quite a lot of negative years," Halverson said. "But it was just like the one thing that kept me going was like, 'I will make it. I will play. I will get to play one NHL game.' "

When he signed on Feb. 3, Halverson had a 12-7-7 record with a .918 save percentage and 2.20 goals-against average with the Syracuse Crunch, which earned the 6-foot-5, 235-pound stopper an invite to the AHL All-Star Game.

The future is bright for the goalie many may have once written off, but the hard work has just begun. "It's taken a lot of hard work to get to this point, but I had a good talk with Joel (Crunch coach Bouchard) the other day, and he's telling me to double down on what I've been doing," Halverson said. "A lot of goalies crack the NHL, and not a lot of goalies stay in the NHL. I understand what it took to get to this point. But there's a whole other level I have to get to to make my real dream a reality. And the hard work is just beginning."

SCOTT THOMAS/SYRACUSE CRUNCH

DRIVE TO SUCCEED
Gagner has to commute two hours each way to and from practice, but he's willing to do whatever it takes.

BELLEVILLE SENATORS

FIRE STILL BURNS

After nearly two decades as a pro, Sam Gagner has learned to fit anywhere in a lineup. And while he's long lived the NHL life, he's happy to play in the AHL **BY BILL HOPPE**

As SAM GAGNER WAITED for a fresh opportunity, he said he'd come to grips with the fact his NHL career could be over after 17 seasons and 1,043 games.

After serving as a black ace throughout the Edmonton Oilers' Stanley Cup run last spring, the veteran center generated mild interest as a free agent. Some teams offered two-way contracts that he believes could have led to recalls.

But those deals made little sense for Gagner, who was drafted sixth overall by Edmonton in 2007. "I'm at a stage now," Gagner said, "where everything I do now has my family in mind."

So, for months, Gagner stayed at home in Toronto with his wife, Dr. Rachel Linke, and the couple's three children, preparing for that next chance while enjoying his life as a husband and father.

In December, he played for Canada at the Spengler Cup, his first game action in eight months. Not long after, he signed a professional tryout deal with the AHL Belleville Senators.

Belleville assistant coach Stefan Legein, Gagner's good friend, had been in his ear about joining the team. Gagner also played with Steve Staios – GM of Belleville's parent club in Ottawa – early in his career. "When you don't have a job, you think about it a lot," said Gagner of retirement. "But you know what? I wasn't ready, so when this opportunity presented itself, I thought, 'Let's give it a go.' "

In late January, Gagner began a new routine. Most mornings, he wakes up at 6 a.m. and drives about two hours to Belleville for practice. On his trips, he likes to catch up on podcasts and spend some time alone with his thoughts.

He's back home by the afternoon to pick up his children from school. "I don't get to do what I love to do without the support of my wife and kids, and I'm very fortunate that way," said Gagner outside the visiting dressing room of Rochester's Blue Cross Arena before hopping on a bus to Utica.

His ultimate goal, of course, is to make it back to the NHL. He's always returned to the big leagues following his stints in the minors, including last year, when he turned an AHL deal with Bakersfield into an NHL pact with Edmonton in barely a week. "I still feel I can contribute at that level," he said.

As an 18-year-old rookie with the Oilers in 2007-08, Gagner was the NHL's youngest full-time player. He burst into the league, showcasing soft hands that made him a stud in shootouts. He enjoyed remarkable consistency over his first eight seasons, averaging 15 goals and 42 points.

As Gagner moved around – in addition to three separate stints with the Oilers, he has played for six other NHL teams – he evolved into a more mature player. "The last five, six years of my career, I've played a lot in the bottom six and killed penalties," he said. "I think as you go along in your career, you have to adapt, and I've tried to be a dependable guy that can be thrown over the boards in any situation and give you good minutes but still chip in offensively when the opportunity presents."

He could be an intriguing option for an NHL team looking to add veteran depth next season.

In the meantime, Gagner is happy in Belleville. No one in the AHL has more NHL experience. At 35, only six players in the league are older. On that Feb. 21 night in Rochester, the rest of his teammates had a combined 108 games of big-league experience. "He goes out early and stays out late with the guys, and it's already been infectious with the guys," said Belleville coach David Bell. "He's like another coach to us, which is outstanding. On the bench, he's talking to guys about what he sees."

In the AHL, Gagner must adapt to what he said is "a little more chaotic" game. "It's a hard, hard league," he said. "I don't think people understand how hard the league is and give it enough credit. But I love to play the game, so when I get an opportunity, I'll jump at it."

TOP: JANA CHYTILOVA/BELLEVILLE SENATORS; MIDDLE: CHRIS TANOUYE/BELLEVILLE SENATORS

TOLEDO WALLEYE

REFOCUSED FOR CUP RUN

After nursing his dog back to health from a near-fatal accident, Tyler Spezia can now hone in on hockey once again – and finally getting his hands on the Kelly Cup

BY STEPHEN KERR

NOV. 18, 2024 IS a date that Tyler Spezia will never forget, no matter how hard he tries.

The 5-foot-10, 180-pound Toledo Walleye left winger returned from practice late that afternoon and was napping while his girlfriend, Josie Weickert, went for a walk with their six-year-old black Labrador, Jersey. Spezia was jolted awake by his phone ringing. It was Josie, and she was hysterical. "Jersey got hit!" she cried.

It had begun raining. A white Dodge pickup didn't see Josie or the dog and proceeded into the crosswalk. Josie, who was not hit, yanked on Jersey's leash, spinning him around. That move likely saved the dog's life. The truck hit Jersey on his backside, causing multiple fractures to his pelvis and mangling most of his tail, which had to be amputated. "If he had continued the way he was going, he would've gotten hit in the head," Spezia said.

Surgery was required to repair Jersey's pelvis, an expensive procedure. A GoFundMe page was set up, and donations poured in from friends, family, teammates and other players and coaches around the ECHL. As difficult as it was to focus on hockey, Spezia, 31, credits the support from coaches and teammates for getting him through the next several weeks. "Trying to go through that and the hockey part, I almost felt like I was doing my teammates a disservice," Spezia said. "My teammates were unbelievable. The staff was unbelievable."

It also helped that Toledo, the Detroit Red Wings' ECHL affiliate, was in playoff contention, a position the team has consistently been in recently. Since 2009-10, the Walleye have made the post-season 10 times, reaching the conference final on six occasions, two of which resulted in Kelly Cup appearances (2019 and 2022). And they're a contender again this season, sitting first in the Central Division.

SCOTT GRAU/TOLEDO WALLEYE

WALLEYE NEVER

Spezia says falling just short of the team's first-ever Kelly Cup in 2019 motivated him to return to Toledo.

Spezia was a rookie during the 2019 run to the Kelly Cup final. He was also loaned to the Grand Rapids Griffins, Detroit's AHL affiliate, collecting a goal and two points in eight games.

Spezia, the middle of five children, grew up in Clinton Township, Mich., and idolized the Red Wings. He tagged along to watch his father, Brian, a referee, and his older brother, Chad, who played youth hockey for Little Caesars. Tyler also began playing for Little Caesars. Then, tragedy struck. Brian passed away after battling lung and liver cancer. Devastated, Tyler decided to step away from hockey temporarily. "When he passed, I didn't do too well with it," he said. "He was the road-trip guy. That was our thing."

When he eventually returned to the rink, Spezia joined Little Caesars' U-18 team before stints in the NAHL and USHL. Wanting to stay close to home, he played collegiate hockey at Bowling Green in Ohio, where he put up 34 goals and 72 points in 147 games. Rather than turning pro in the spring following his senior season like others, Spezia opted to wait until late summer before signing with the Walleye.

It was perfect timing. Spezia helped the team reach the final before they bowed out to the Newfoundland Growlers in six games. He spent 2021-22 with Grand Rapids, as the Walleye fell in five games to the Florida Everblades in that year's final.

Through 51 games this year, Spezia is seventh in the ECHL with 57 points and sixth in goals with 25. While Spezia plays mostly on the left wing, Toledo coach Pat Mikesch isn't afraid to insert him at center. "He can play in every situation," Mikesch said. "He's strong offensively and just as strong defensively. That's comforting for a coach."

Jersey has made a remarkable recovery and is almost back to normal dog activities. Spezia can now focus on erasing the sting of losing in the 2019 Kelly Cup. "There's a bitter taste in my mouth about the way it ended," Spezia said. "I went down (in 2022) and watched them lose in the final again to Florida. It's why I decided to come back to Toledo versus other options." H

MONCTON WILDCATS

CATS OUTTA THE BAG

It's no secret that Moncton is a QMJHL juggernaut this season. And with hometown boy Dyllan Gill on board, the Wildcats are looking to reign supreme **BY WILL MACLAREN**

WILDLY SUCCESSFUL

Moncton has run roughshod over the QMJHL in 2024-25, with both the best offense and defense in the league.

NO PLAYER WANTS TO finish their first year of pro hockey back in junior. But if that's where the path leads, the situation Dyllan Gill now finds himself in is about as ideal as one could ask for. The 20-year-old defenseman has taken his 24 games of AHL experience with the Syracuse Crunch back home to Moncton and the QMJHL-leading Wildcats.

A seventh-round pick of the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2022, the 6-foot-3, 196-pound Gill offers everything teams at all levels covet in a blueliner: size, strength, poise in all zones, superior decision-making and a right-handed shot.

Perhaps the most useful tool at his disposal, however, is a nuanced approach to a difficult situation faced in being returned to junior. "It was a lot of mixed emotions," Gill said. "Staying in pro was the end goal, but seeing the circumstances, I was also super excited. There's no better situation for me in being sent back. Getting to come back home, enjoy mom's cooking and sleeping in my own bed is something I've never had the opportunity to enjoy in my junior career. It was an adjustment for me, but it's going quite well so far."

The Wildcats, who acquired Gill from the Rouyn-Noranda Huskies at the time of his return to junior, consider "going quite well" to be an off day. They feature a depth of roster that has produced both the top offense and defense in the league. It's just another positive for Gill, who grew up in the neighboring town of Riverview, N.B., and whose family have been season-ticket holders for years. "It's definitely a full-circle moment for me," Gill said. "Plus, my parents don't need season tickets now since they get billet tickets."

For all the Cats possess, pro experience is the one item that Gill, who scored twice in his AHL debut last fall, can deliver to an already loaded lineup. "For me, it was the habits that I learned," he said when asked about the key takeaways from his Syracuse sojourn. "In pro, they provide you the resources and it's up to you how you choose to use them. I learned a lot from other players about how I can maximize those resources and the habits on a day-to-day basis to better myself on the ice. It's those little details that I've brought back to share with the team."

Those habits have been well received by a Moncton franchise that prides itself on offering a first-class experience for its players and staff, year in and year out. It's another factor that sat in the back of Gill's mind upon his return, and it's something he bore witness to in the stands as a kid. "There's a good winning culture here with very high standards," he said. "I believe in all the things they also believe in. Taylor (GM MacDougall) and (coach) Gardiner MacDougall have been great to work with. I have nothing but good things to say about them. The organization has been built the right way. There's a lot of people within it that have a lot of pride for the Wildcats."

The Wildcats, who are searching for their first playoff title in 15 years, had initially intended to submit a bid to host this spring's Memorial Cup. However, the league's intent to hold the event in Quebec (the Rimouski Oceanic will host) after a decade-long hiatus snuffed those plans.

The way Gill sees it, having the group who've come together in Moncton this year is the next best thing to securing the host's spot. "It's tough to find a roster in the country I'm convinced is better than ours," he said. "In a seven-game series, our group has what it takes to come out on top. It's going to be up to us and how well we deal with those opportunities to win those series. We're going to have a chance to do something special."

Originally, it looked like the Memorial Cup could be a family reunion, as Dyllan's younger brother Spencer, a Philadelphia Flyers pick, plays for the Oceanic. But Spencer sustained an ankle injury in early March that was likely to keep him out for the rest of the year.

Meanwhile, as his Wildcats look to claim the franchise's third QMJHL title, the elder Gill isn't getting ahead of himself. "For me, I'm trying to give myself and my teammates the best possibility of getting (to the Memorial Cup) as I can," he said. "There's a lot of hockey to be played and a lot of things can happen. We'll worry about the future as it gets closer." H

PHOTOS BY MONCTON WILDCATS

UNDERDOG MENTALITY
Gelinas and the Huskies won't enter the post-season as favorites, but they've shown a penchant for upsets.

ROUYN-NORANDA HUSKIES

CUNNING CANINE

After joining Rouyn-Noranda from Jr. A, Remi Gelinas quickly found his bite with the Huskies, making them a team to watch in the QMJHL playoffs **BY WILL MACLAREN**

WHEN THE CHL AND NCAA reached a landmark deal in November, permitting junior-aged athletes from the WHL, OHL and QMJHL to continue their careers in the American university ranks, players from coast to coast in both nations took note with more than a hint of eagerness. Remi Gelinas was among them.

The native of St-Eustache, Que., spent two-and-a-half years bearing down on netminders at the Jr. A level while retaining his NCAA eligibility. Twenty-six games into his latest campaign with the Central Canada League's Hawkesbury Hawks, where he was averaging nearly two points per contest, a game-changing decision loomed. "I thought about (my future) when the rules changed," Gelinas said. "I didn't know what to do or what was going to happen. I was talking to (contacts within the NCAA), and they were saying I should go to the 'Q.' They wanted to see me at the next level. It helped make up my mind about making the switch."

Gelinas made his QMJHL debut on Dec. 13, which was, not coincidentally, the day Christmas came early for his new squad, the Rouyn-Noranda Huskies. The 19-year-old winger got his feet wet with a pair of pre-holiday games while mentally taking notes. "I knew what to expect coming back from the break and how to prepare," he said. "After that, things just went my way."

Not only is Gelinas talented, he's decidedly modest. A two-goal effort in his first game after the holiday pause ignited a 14-game point streak for the league's newest star. It was a performance that sparked the Huskies to wins in six of their first seven post-Christmas games as they continued to jockey for position in the contentious Western Conference.

Could he have envisioned averaging a goal per game through his first full month in major junior? "Umm, no," said Gelinas with a laugh. "That was actually kind of a shock. I knew I was able to play here and make a difference. I had to have confidence coming in to be able to help the team win."

And while he hasn't maintained that absurd pace, his production has dipped only slightly. Through 30 games, Gelinas had potted 24 goals and 39 points. Playing alongside last year's league leader in assists and points, Antonin Verreault, and dynamic 2025 NHL draft prospect Bill Zonnon has enabled Gelinas to elevate his game. But the ability to maintain the pace of such linemates while also cashing in regularly is a role not everyone can perform. The recruitment team at Clarkson University has already recognized these qualities. In the fall of 2026, Gelinas will be taking his talents to Potsdam, N.Y., while pursuing a degree in either finance or business.

He's quick to point out the groundbreaking agreement as a pivotal moment. "Going to the 'Q' was an opportunity for me to prove this was a case of wanting to go NCAA and not a situation where I was overlooked (by the league)," Gelinas said. "It was great to be able to make that choice for myself."

In the meantime, Gelinas has a potentially long maiden voyage through the 2025 Gilles-Courteau Trophy playoffs to prepare for. This "veteran rookie" has already seen plenty to get excited about from a squad that's made finding the back of the net its calling card for much of the past two years. "We've got a good group of forwards, and our forecheck has been great," Gelinas said. "In net, (Samuel) Meloche is young, but he's fast. We've shown a lot of character. If we can build off that, we could be dangerous."

There's another factor that could make these dogs a post-season wild card. When reminded of the fact the Huskies have played giant killers this season, claiming multiple victories over league juggernauts Moncton, Rimouski and Drummondville, Gelinas is blunt. "If I were them, I'd be scared to play against us," he said.

For a guy who plans on pursuing a degree based largely on numbers, Gelinas has a way with words, too.

JEAN LAPOINTE/ROUYN-NORANDA HUSKIES

BRANTFORD BULLDOGS

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

While Nick Lardis has dealt with a lot of upheaval during his OHL career, one thing that has remained a constant is his scoring ability. And with a new sense of stability in Brantford, he's hoping to lead the Bulldogs to an OHL title **BY TONY FERRARI**

PHOTO BY BRANTFORD BULLDOGS

CHANGE HAS BEEN A near-constant part of Nick Lardis' life in hockey.

Lardis began his OHL career in Peterborough after the Petes took him sixth overall in the 2021 OHL draft. After a solid start to his OHL career, Lardis was traded to the Hamilton Bulldogs midway through his sophomore season. The move brought him closer to his hometown of Oakville, allowing him to move back in with his parents. But the homecoming was short-lived. That summer, the Bulldogs relocated to Brantford, which meant Lardis would be moving back in with a billet family.

Throughout all of that upheaval, Lardis developed into a go-to scorer at the OHL level. That put him on NHL teams' radars going into the 2023 draft, where he went 67th overall to the Chicago Blackhawks. Although Lardis lost a large portion of the following season to a wrist injury, his offensive numbers again took a step.

And at the end of the year, Lardis got his first taste of pro hockey with the Hawks' AHL affiliate in Rockford. "That time with Rockford was great for me," Lardis said. "I was able to see how they do it at the next level and go into the summer with an idea of what I needed to do to be the best version of me in what I hope is my last year of junior hockey."

That short experience in the AHL helped Lardis understand the strength and speed of the pro game. It was a valuable lesson, but above all, he realized that consistency was what he needed. With so much going on around him over which he had very little control, Lardis realized that doing the little things right would allow him to take his game to new heights.

This past summer, Lardis spent countless hours shooting, stickhandling and going to the gym to build up his body for the upcoming season. Working on getting better every day was his biggest goal coming into this season – a campaign that was, incidentally, to be his first season in his junior career with relative stability.

Stability looks good on him. He'd already broken Brantford's single-season goal record on Feb. 8, but he had his sights set on a loftier ambition.

The 70-goal plateau had only been reached on seven occasions in OHL history – and only once since 1991 (John Tavares in 2006-07). But as part of a two-goal effort against Saginaw on March 8, Lardis became the OHL's eighth 70-goal man. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it," said Lardis, 19, prior to hitting the mark. "You see hockey pages post about it on Instagram and stuff, and I would love to hit 70. It would be a great way to finish my last season in junior as long as I'm still scoring in the playoffs."

The Bulldogs are one of the top teams in the OHL heading into the post-season, and Lardis has led the way with his offensive punch. The ability to score at a moment's notice is elevated by his unrelenting speed and vastly improved work ethic away from the puck.

To win in major junior, teams need a difference-making talent, someone capable of popping off for a five-point night in any given game. Lardis scored his 60th goal of the season by capping off his sixth hat trick of the year. Just three nights later, he potted hat trick No. 7.

In Brantford, Lardis is that difference-maker. "We have a special group," he said. "There aren't small groups of guys that hang out. I've hung out with every guy on this team off of the ice. We've built bonds as a group most of us have never had before. We all just want to do our job for the guy next to us, and we trust that they'll do their job for us."

Consistency has been the key. Lardis said the lack of changes the team made at the trade deadline felt like a vote of confidence in what they already had.

More stability was added in January, when a group led by Edmonton Oilers right winger Zach Hyman bought the franchise and committed to keeping it in Brantford long-term. Hyman and his father, Stuart, and brother, Spencer, are now the team's principal owners. With no potential relocation back to Hamilton or anywhere else in the near future, there's nothing lurking over their shoulders. "I'm just really happy to be here in Brantford," Lardis said. "This city and this team have helped make me who I am."

Rewarding his newfound home with an OHL title would set a standard of success in Brantford for years to come. **H**

THAT'S A LOT OF HATS

When Lardis scored his 60th goal of the season, it capped off his sixth hat trick of 2024-25.

TWICE AS KNIGHTS
London has gone back-to-back as OHL champions once in club history. They're looking to replicate that feat this year.

LONDON KNIGHTS

LAST DANCE FOR LONDON'S CORE

The London Knights' four-man core have done a lot of winning together. But, as they approach their final post-season run, they have one more trophy still to lift **BY TONY FERRARI**

IN OCTOBER OF 2022, for the first time in a very long time, the London Knights were coming into a season with low expectations. They had a young roster, which was atypical for a team consistently at the top of the OHL standings. It was supposed to be a 'step back' year in London.

After the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled the 2020 playoffs and the entirety of the 2020-21 season, the Knights were ready to hit reset and move forward. They were set on competing down the line, with 2024-25 to be the peak of their window.

Denver Barkey was coming into 2022-23 after a rookie season in which he had 15 points in a depth role. Easton Cowan and Oliver Bonk each had cups of coffee with London but spent most of their 2021-22 seasons at the Jr. B level. Sam Dickinson had just been drafted fourth overall by the Niagara IceDogs, but he didn't report to camp, so he was traded to the highest bidder, the Knights.

For the next three years, those four would comprise the core of the London Knights in what has the potential to be one of the most successful runs in franchise history.

That first year, the plucky young Knights were far better than expected, winning their division and making a run to the OHL final before coming up short against a veteran-laden Peterborough Petes squad. The Knights' core four were fantastic in the playoffs, with Cowan and Barkey finishing top five in team scoring, while Bonk and Dickinson played major minutes in all situations on the back end. "We had a lot of young guys like Easton, Denver and Oliver playing big roles," Dickinson said ahead of the 2023-24 playoffs. "It was heartbreaking to lose in the final. It lights a fire under us and pushes us to want to win a championship this year."

The Knights were dominant from start to finish in 2023-24, winning 50 games and heading into the post-season as the league's top team. Cowan led the OHL playoffs in scoring, while Barkey tied for third. Dickinson and Bonk were monsters on the blueline. But this time, the Knights weren't settling for second, posting a 16-2 playoff record and sweeping the final over the Oshawa Generals en route to their first OHL championship since 2016. "We know the job's not finished," Cowan said on the ice after winning the OHL title. "We'll enjoy this for a few days, but we are ready to head to Saginaw (for the Memorial Cup)."

SAM
DICKINSON

A couple of weeks later, the Knights were in the Memorial Cup final against the only team they lost a game to in the OHL playoffs, the host Saginaw Spirit. The Knights' core players were where they wanted to be. But after the Knights fought back from a three-goal deficit, Saginaw scored the go-ahead goal with 22 seconds remaining, and the Knights once again felt defeat to end their season.

Despite the OHL championship, Barkey, Dickinson, Cowan and Bonk were left with a sour taste in their mouths and a sickening feeling in their guts. They were confident they were the best team in the OHL. "We are a motivated group," said Barkey, now the Knights captain, of chasing redemption this season. "We know this is our last year together, and we want to finish the job."

To get to Rimouski, where the Memorial Cup is this year, the team has to go back to the OHL final and take home the J. Ross Robertson Cup once again. It would be the first time in the Knights' history they reached the final three straight years and the second time winning back-to-back OHL titles. "It would be really special," Dickinson said. "Since the Hunters came in here, this organization has been competitive every year. This group has always worked toward winning the championship. It's not just a London thing though; it's an OHL-wide thing. Getting to three straight finals would be special for this team and these guys."

The core four have been through it all together. The highs and the lows. They've won a title and had two ripped from their grasp. The journey they've been on has shaped this group. They're battled-tested. "These guys make it easy, and it helps to know I'm not the only leader," Barkey said. "We all lead in different ways. Some of us are bigger talkers; others lead by example. Knowing I have other guys' backs and they have mine is what matters. Each one of us in this group lead in our own ways because we're all leaders."

The Knights are ready to make history. The core four are dead set on ending their run together on a high. If all goes well, they'll be lifting a trophy twice this year, once in London and then again in Rimouski.

As both Barkey and Cowan said: "It's our only goal." H

TOP: KALVIN TAYLOR/GOODALL MEDIA; MIDDLE: LUKE DURDA/OHL IMAGES

'VETERAN' JUNIOR
Cristall brings winning wisdom after being a black ace with AHL Hershey during their Calder Cup run in 2024.

LARRY BRUNT/SPOKANE CHIEFS

SPOKANE CHIEFS

CRISTALL CLEAR FUTURE

The Capitals already had plenty of confidence in their 2023 second-rounder, but now, he's looking like an obvious blue-chipper after a trade to Spokane **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

WHEN PROSPECTS FIRST join their NHL teams, they're often assigned random uniform numbers until they prove they have staying power.

But the Washington Capitals gave Andrew Cristall an immediate vote of confidence after they selected him in the second round (40th overall) in 2023. "When I got drafted, they had No. 28 in my stall," he said. "I thought that was pretty nice."

After starting his hockey career wearing No. 14 as an homage to former Canucks winger Alex Burrows, the Vancouver native chose to double his digits when he joined the WHL's Kelowna Rockets in 2021. And while Cristall was wearing No. 28 when he nearly cracked the Caps' opening-night lineup last fall after a strong showing in four pre-season games, he might find himself asking for a switch when he returns to camp next season as a 20-year-old who's leaving junior hockey on the highest of notes.

In January, he flipped from No. 28 to No. 82 after a blockbuster deadline trade from the Rockets to the Spokane Chiefs. That move boosted his game from impressive to supernova.

In his draft year, Cristall finished sixth in the WHL scoring race with 39 goals and 95 points. Last season, he improved to fifth place, with 40 goals and 111 points. This year, he solidified his status as a top trade target for any contender looking for more juice by putting up 60 points in just 28 games with the Rockets.

When he debuted with the Chiefs against the Everett Silvertips on Jan. 10, Cristall was held off the scoresheet. The next night, his chemistry with left winger Shea Van Olm and center Berkly Catton ignited. Cristall showed the Chiefs' fan base what he was capable of by racking up three goals and four assists in his new team's 12-2 road win over the Wenatchee Wild. By the time he'd played 12 games for Spokane, he'd collected 35 points and run the gauntlet, also logging six-, five-, four-, three-, two- and one-point nights. "I think playing with good players definitely really helps," Cristall said. "And the team that we have here is a really close-knit group. Everybody is working towards the goal of winning and having a good playoff run."

The Chiefs are aiming to get past the first round for the first time since reaching the Western Conference final in 2019. First-year coach Brad Lauer arrived as a proven winner, having taken the Edmonton Oil Kings to a championship in 2022. Lauer is back in the WHL after two successful seasons as an NHL assistant with the Winnipeg Jets and has also done time behind AHL benches. "He wants us to get to the next level and stay there," Cristall said. "He has so much experience in the game of hockey, so it's been really cool to see what he has to say and take his advice in different scenarios. It's been really good."

On top of his explosive offense, Cristall has also brought some veteran wisdom and experience to Spokane. Last spring, after he put up 15 points in 11 playoff games, he was invited to join the Hershey Bears as a black ace and soaked up every detail as the Capitals' AHL farm team captured its second straight Calder Cup. "I was skating every day and working out every day with their staff," Cristall said. "Then, just seeing how the whole organization is run, they know what it takes to win. For me to be able to be there and learn from the guys in the room was a super-awesome experience that I'll carry with me."

Back in Vancouver last summer, Cristall skated with his usual group, which includes his older brother, Tyler, now a junior at St. Lawrence University, and NHLers such as Kent Johnson, Mathew Barzal and longtime spring-hockey teammate Connor Bedard.

Cristall also continued his individual work with renowned skating consultant Barb Aidelbaum. "For the past two summers, the progress has been there," Cristall said. "I'm seeing it on the ice, and I'm feeling really good. I'm super excited to work with her again and keep making those strides. Become faster, stronger and more powerful."

If he does, the Capitals will surely let him choose whichever number he wants.

PRINCE ALBERT RAIDERS

FLYING HIGH

Tomas Mrsic has found himself in some unexpected spots recently. But if he keeps playing as he has, he knows exactly where his future will lie **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

MARK PETERSON/PRINCE ALBERT RAIDERS

AFTER SPENDING YEARS working toward a chance to play in the NHL, Tomas Mrsic could never have envisioned his first game in a St. Louis Blues uniform would take place in Des Moines, Iowa.

Not so long ago, Mrsic would've also raised an eyebrow if he'd known he'd make his pro debut against a team called the Utah Hockey Club.

Iowa's Wells Fargo Arena may not exude the same mystique as Madison Square Garden or Montreal's Bell Centre. But when you're fresh off being taken in the fourth round of the NHL draft and used to riding the buses across the prairies for gruelling WHL road trips, even a neutral-site exhibition game in the heart of the U.S. Midwest can serve up a memorable "welcome to the NHL" moment before it's time to go back to junior. "I was pretty excited taking a private jet to the game, doing what all the NHL guys do," Mrsic said. "That was definitely very special."

But on Sept. 22, the brand-new Utah squad hit the ice for its first-ever preseason game. On the other side, Mrsic suited up for the Blues as part of a lineup that included legendary WHL alums Brayden Schenn and Joel Hofer as well as Mrsic's fellow 2024 draft pick Adam Jecho, a familiar foe from the Edmonton Oil Kings.

Now playing left wing, Mrsic came up as a center through the Burnaby Winter Club and Delta Hockey Academy programs. His foundational skills were his speed and rocket of a shot.

He looked to star pivots like Auston Matthews and Sidney Crosby as role models and often clashed with the top local player in his age group, North Vancouver's Macklin Celebrini. "In atom and peewee, we always played against each other, so I played against him a lot," Mrsic said. "Then, also, in tournaments in France, Italy, a bunch of different spring tournaments, I played with him as well."

That tournament list includes a perfect 8-0-0 record with the B.C. Junior Canucks at the 2016 Brick Invitational in Edmonton. With the versatile Celebrini playing defense, Mrsic stepped up in the title game, posting a hat trick in B.C.'s 5-1 win over Minnesota.

Last August, Mrsic's junior-hockey life was rocked by an unexpected trade as WHL training camps began. After he finished fourth in team scoring for the Medicine Hat Tigers last season, with 62 points, Mrsic was looking forward to chasing a championship in 2025, with Tigers phenom Gavin McKenna leading the way.

But one day after making the drive east from his home in Surrey, B.C., Mrsic was blindsided when he learned coach-GM Willie Desjardins had packaged him with a pair of draft picks to acquire Ryder Ritchie from the Prince Albert Raiders. "I got there Saturday night, and then Sunday morning, I went in to practice," Mrsic said. "I got called into the coaches' office, and they told me. That was the day after I got to Med Hat, and then the day after that, I just drove to Prince Albert."

Though the deal seemingly came out of nowhere, it has worked out for both Eastern Conference teams. While McKenna and the Tigers have lived up to their billing in the Central Division, Mrsic has taken on a more prominent role with the Raiders, who've spent the season battling the Brandon Wheat Kings and Saskatoon Blades for top spot in the East Division. "We have a lot of younger guys that are also learning," Mrsic said. "And for myself, I'm getting the most opportunity I can get and taking advantage of that and just helping the team as much as I can this year."

Mrsic quickly found chemistry on a line with Aiden Oiring and Brayden Dube, and he began piling up power-play points. In mid-November, Mrsic earned WHL player-of-the-week honors with seven points in two games, including his first career hat trick.

HE SHOOTS, HE SOARS

Life on the road in the WHL isn't glitzy, but Mrsic got to enjoy one private flight in the NHL pre-season.

By the end of February, two days after his 19th birthday, Mrsic was up to 32 goals and 82 points, hovering in the top 10 in WHL scoring and looking forward to seeing his new team make post-season noise.

He's right where he's supposed to be.

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WISCONSIN BADGERS

BADGER BOUNTY

Casey O'Brien leaves Wisconsin as its all-time leading scorer, but she's most proud of the national titles that add to the program's championship legacy **BY IAN KENNEDY**

WHEN CENTER CASEY O'Brien stepped on the campus at the University of Wisconsin in 2020, there was no guarantee she'd get to start – never mind finish – her rookie season. NCAA hockey had been through the stops and starts of the pandemic, and the risk loomed that any given game could be the last.

Fast-forward five seasons, and there are now certainties for O'Brien and her team. She will leave the powerhouse WCHA program as one of the all-time greats, and the Badgers have added multiple national titles in one of the most dominant eras in program history.

O'Brien has played her way into the company of Wisconsin's legendary list of alumni. This season, one by one, she passed Meghan Duggan, Brianna Decker and Hilary Knight to become Wisconsin's all-time leading scorer. She finished the regular season with 23 goals and 72 points in just 34 games. But ascending the school's scoring charts was never a focus for O'Brien, nor did she know how close she was to passing the trio of past and present U.S. national-team members who have a combined 22 World Championship gold medals. "It's super special and super humbling," O'Brien said. "I never really thought about it coming to Wisconsin, and even coming into this year, I never realized how close all this was. Duggan, Decker, Knight, they're legends. They've done so much for the women's game, so to even be mentioned among that list is such an honor. It's really special to me."

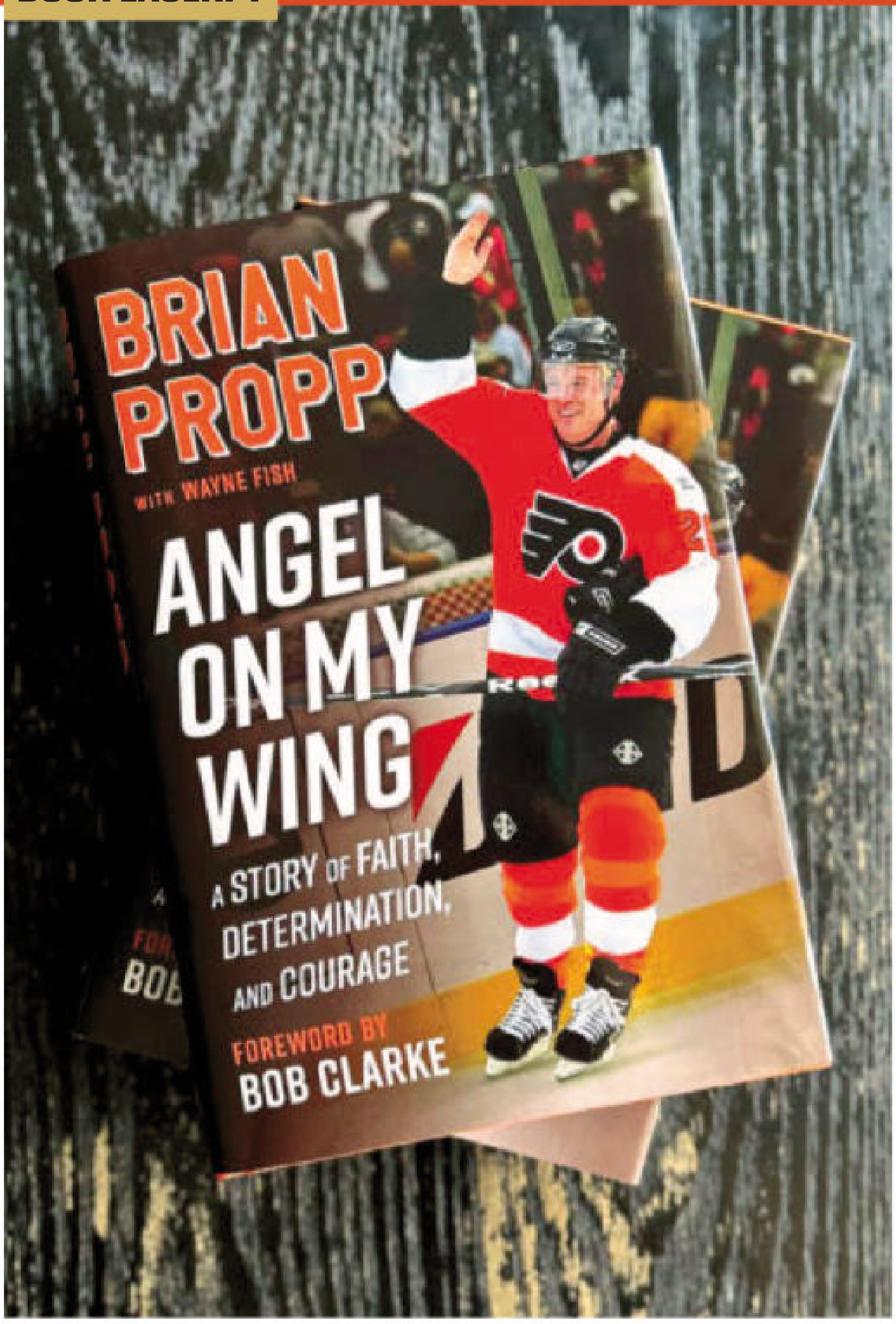
O'Brien is on the verge of her own national-team career after representing the U.S. in the Rivalry Series this season. She's also about to start her professional career as a near-certain first-round pick in the 2025 PWHL draft. She leaves a legacy of having won two national titles with Wisconsin with a chance at a third at the 2025 Frozen Four in Minnesota in late March. And even though the program is losing its all-time leading scorer to a bright future in the pros, there's also a bright future for the Badgers. "Every single freshman that comes in every single year, no matter what their role is or how many minutes they're playing when they get here, every freshman wants to be the best," O'Brien said. "They're competitive, and you see it in practice every single day. When everybody wants to be the best and is constantly looking for ways to make themselves better, it makes the team better."

BADGER OF HONOR
O'Brien leaves Wisconsin as the program's most prolific producer and having added to the title tally.

A first-team all-American in 2024, the native of Milton, Mass., wants to stay involved in hockey for as long as she can, not only as a player but also potentially as a coach or on the administrative side. Her interest in contributing to the game after her playing career is likely a byproduct of the leadership she's experienced and exuded in Madison. "When you come into a place like Wisconsin with that kind of drive and then learn from the veterans, you grow both as a player and a person and as a leader both on and off the ice," she said. "This culture of making everyone around you better is what keeps this program at such a high level. I know when I'm leaving here that the program's in good hands. I know that whoever the freshmen are coming in are going to do everything they can to make this a better place and leave it better than they found it."

In that first pandemic-shortened season, O'Brien finished her rookie year with a national title by beating Northeastern in overtime. It was a win that O'Brien says stands out above the rest as it came with the relief and elation of a win amid uncertainty. A second national title followed in 2023. "Knowing I can look back on my career and see I contributed to our team's success in any way, whether it's on the stat sheet or not, is special," O'Brien said. "But that individual success I've had is just a testament to how good the last five teams I've been on were and how great my teammates and linemates have been. It's more a testament to the overall group than it is to individual success." H

TOP: DAVID STLUKA/WISCONSIN ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS; MIDDLE: TOM LYNN/WISCONSIN ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS



‘IT WASN’T MY TIME’

A heart condition led to a stroke that nearly ended my life at 56 **BY BRIAN PROPP**

EVERYONE HAS DATES IN their history that mark life-changing moments, be they for the better or worse.

For some, it can be that first kiss, a straight-A report card, or, on the flip side, missing the final cut of an eventual championship sports team.

I’ve had many positive experiences in my existence. It would be difficult to pick out just one. But on the negative side, one split second in time stands out beyond all the rest – one that took place early on the fateful morning of Sept. 3, 2015.

Let me explain all the medical challenges and circumstances that led up to that late summer day.

I had been a hockey player from early youth. Hardly anyone who competes in the sport that long gets through without some form of injury or medical condition.

For me, it was Atrial Fibrillation or AFib, a condition known as the most common type of irregular heartbeat, which often causes the heart to beat too quickly. One of the biggest concerns with AFib is the risk of stroke. In fact, people with AFib have approximately five times greater risk of stroke than those who do not have AFib.

I found out I had AFib after my career with the Flyers and other NHL teams. I learned from about the year 2000 on that I had this condition. My physician, Dr. Gary Dorshimer, found it, and what I started to do was take mandatory blood thinners and a small aspirin every day to control the risk of blood clots forming.

It took a little while to control all those levels and get them right. After that, I had to take a blood thinner every day. Doctors told me to be careful not to get another concussion or head injury.

That said, by the time 2005 rolled around, doctors informed me that my AFib condition had gotten worse. I underwent some new tests at the University of Pennsylvania, where a team stopped my heart momentarily and then restarted it to get it back on the proper rhythm.

I wanted to make sure I was not in AFib again, and it’s safe to say a lot of prayers were quietly spoken that morning.

I don’t know if that really worked, so it was back to blood thinners and baby aspirin.

Around Labor Day 2015, a week before a trip to Annapolis, Md., we took the family to visit the U.S. Naval Academy for my son, Jackson. My day-to-day health seemed to take a wrong turn just before this hiatus. I checked into Shore Medical Center, but they didn’t find anything, so we decided to go on the trip. In hindsight, that probably wasn’t a good idea.

I was feeling OK the first day, but after that, I had a really bad headache. Something was definitely wrong.

Sometime during the night, my world got turned upside down.

Later, I learned I had undergone a massive stroke that affected my heart and my brain in three different places. In the middle of the night, I just fell out of bed, hit the side of the bed and lost a couple of teeth. I couldn’t talk or walk or do anything.

Thankfully, my family was there to call 911 pretty fast.

I stayed in the hospital for five days. From there, I was transferred to Magee Rehabilitation in Philadelphia. Safe to say, we got to know each other pretty well. I was there for six weeks, doing three hours per day of occupational and speech therapy, not to mention physical therapy.

Some of the things I took for granted were gone. A task as simple as brushing one’s own teeth or tying a shoe needed some tinkering. It became pretty clear right away that all this was going to take time, and there weren’t going to be any shortcuts.

After a year, I was ready for something called “Watchman” surgery on my heart. Dr. David Collins headed up the surgical team at the University of Pennsylvania. They implanted a device to control my AFib.

> **SOMETIME DURING THE NIGHT, MY WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN**

Ever since that day, Sept. 3, 2015, I’ve wondered why I pretty much circumnavigated a situation that could have been a lot worse.

Maybe it has something to do with the power of positive thinking. Perhaps it’s because I believe that all this isn’t just random existence but rather something to do with purpose.

When people ask if it ever occurred to me that my life as I know it might be over at age 56, I smile, shrug my shoulders, and say, “I knew it wasn’t my time because I haven’t met my grandchildren yet.”

The preceding was an excerpt from Angel on My Wing *by* ***Brian Propp*** *with* ***Wayne Fish****, published by Triumph Books*

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ICE CAPADES A SHORE THING?

It seems like figure skating and hockey's 'Old Blood and Guts' wouldn't be a fit, but the Bruins legend was a key figure in the rise of the famous travelling troupe **BY CLAYTON TRUTOR**

TYPICALLY, WHEN ONE thinks about Eddie Shore, they think about hockey's greatest tough guy. Nicknamed 'Old Blood and Guts,' the legendary Boston Bruins defenseman spilled plenty of both during his Hall of Fame career.

But it turns out that Shore's name is also strongly associated with a winter pastime other than hockey. Shore was one of the founders of Ice Capades, the touring extravaganza that featured well-known international figure skaters, choreographed on-ice routines, chorus lines of skaters and costumed characters galore. In the troupe's early years, many reporters called Ice Capades the "Rockettes on skates." This was a rather on-the-nose descriptor, especially since longtime Rockettes producer Russell Markert served as Ice Capades' first creative director.

As his NHL career wound down, Shore purchased the moribund Springfield Indians franchise from the AHL in 1939. He owned the team, served as GM and played for the club. At the same time, he leased Springfield's Eastern States Coliseum and was responsible for booking other events into the building. To top it all off, Shore was still playing in the NHL, splitting the 1939-40 season between the Bruins and the New York Americans.

"He played for the Americans when he could, and he played for Springfield," said Ted Shore, age 94, the son of Eddie Shore. "There was one time that season when he played 19 games in 23 nights."

Ted was nine when his family moved into an apartment in downtown Springfield. In later years, the younger Shore worked for the Coliseum, holding virtually every job in the organization, from laborer to promoter.

Eddie Shore was always on the lookout for more business for his building. In February 1940, he headed to Hershey, Pa., for a meeting of East Coast arena operators searching for more money-drawing events for their winter calendars. The assemblage included Shore, Providence's Louis Pieri, Boston's Walter Brown, Buffalo's Louis Jacobs, Cleveland's Al Sutphin, New Haven's Nathan Podoloff, Philadelphia's Pete Tyrrell, Hershey's John Sollenberger and Pittsburgh's John Harris. It was Harris who had the kernel of an idea that led to Ice Capades.

> THERE WAS ONE TIME THAT SEASON WHEN **HE PLAYED 19 GAMES IN 23 NIGHTS** – Ted Shore on his father's busy schedule in 1939-40

Several years earlier, Harris had hired former Olympic champion Sonja Henie to perform between periods at the Duquesne Gardens. Fans who wouldn't otherwise come to a hockey game came to see the figure-skating gold medallist. Ice Follies, a similar skating extravaganza, started touring in the winter of 1936 with great success. Harris, Shore and their associates believed they could launch their own troupe that would make the rounds of their respective buildings. They formed a corporation called the Arena Managers Association, which owned and operated Ice Capades.

No one was more invested in the Ice Capades concept than Shore. He became a leader in the organization, offering to cover expenses to finance production while other operators expressed trepidation.

Ice Capades held its first performance in New Orleans in June 1940 before a six-week engagement at the Atlantic City Convention Hall, a venue that became the summer home for the troupe. Their first national tour then commenced in November 1940. Featured on the first tour were future film stars Belita, a British Olympic figure skater, and Vera Hruba Ralston, a Czech Olympian. Comedic routines and a chorus line of "skating beauties" were also staples of the shows, and Ice Capades would soon add more trick skaters and elaborate song-and-dance routines.

Shore booked Ice Capades to an eight-night stand in Springfield beginning on Christmas 1940 and ending on New Year's Day 1941. The entire run sold out, as it did in most of the other cities. Ice Capades only grew as a phenomenon in sub-

SILVER SCREEN SKATER
Hruba Ralston, a Czech Olympic figure skater and Hollywood actress, featured on the first Ice Capades tour.

sequent years, reaching fans in arenas across North America. Republic Pictures produced a series of Ice Capades films. Ice Capades became such a big operation by the 1950s that the troupe would even bring the ice rink with them, installing portable performance spaces typically in warm-weather cities.

For a time, Ice Capades ran skating schools all over the country known as "chalets." Many of the biggest names in Olympic figure skating made their way to Ice Capades: Dick Button, Peggy Fleming, Scott Hamilton, Dorothy Hamill, JoJo Starbuck and Torvill and Dean, to name a few. "We worked hard to promote the show, and we had good crowds," said Shore, noting that hockey and Ice Capades were roughly comparable draws in Springfield.

Ice Capades required the removal of seats on one end of the arena for its stage, but empty chairs were few and far between when the show came to Springfield. After the initial run in Springfield, the touring company made the week of Thanksgiving its typical time in the city. Shore hosted an elaborate Thanksgiving dinner for the performers each year. Even after he retired from the arena business, Ice Capades continued making its annual trip to Springfield, moving to the new Civic Center beginning in 1972. Ted Shore served as promoter of the Springfield Civic Center shows for a time in the 1980s.

The relationship between the arena and the operators of Ice Capades was excellent, regardless of differing views on appropriate ice temperature. "They said they wanted the ice at 17 or 19 degrees. For hockey, the ice was between six and eight degrees," Ted Shore said.

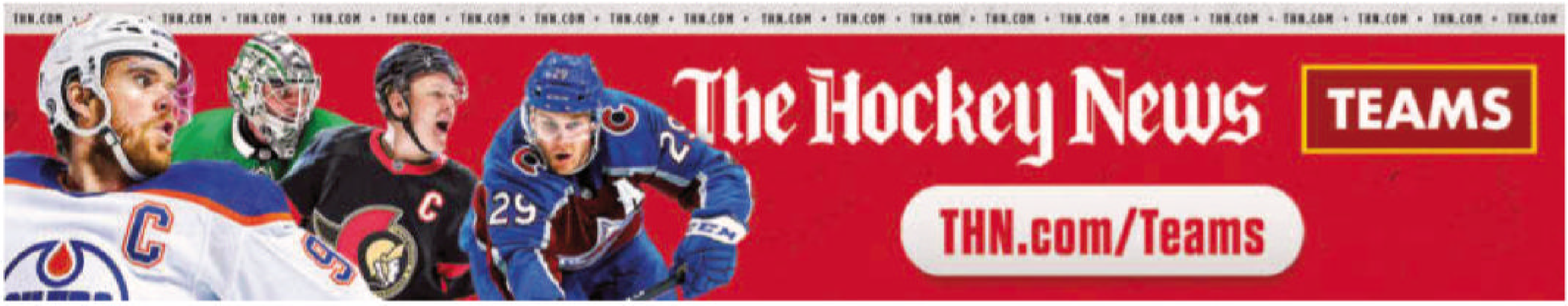
In 1963, the Arena Managers Association sold Ice Capades for $5 million to Metromedia, a conglomerate that owned media properties across North America. In 1986, Metromedia spun off Ice Capades to another conglomerate, International Broadcasting Corporation.

By the time of the IBC sale, Ice Capades was in trouble. The troupe faced ever more competition from the likes of Disney on Ice and Scott Hamilton's Stars on Ice. Ice Capades filed for bankruptcy in 1991. Various well-known individuals, including Hamill and televangelist Pat Robertson, purchased the rights to the Ice Capades name and attempted revivals with limited success.

In a bittersweet twist of fate, the final performances of the original Ice Capades touring company took place in Springfield in 1991. H

Shore consistently packed Springfield's Eastern States Coliseum, whether it was for hockey or the Ice Capades.

HRUBA: PHOTO COURTESY OF PICRYL; SHORE: PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGFIELD HOCKEY HERITAGE SOCIETY



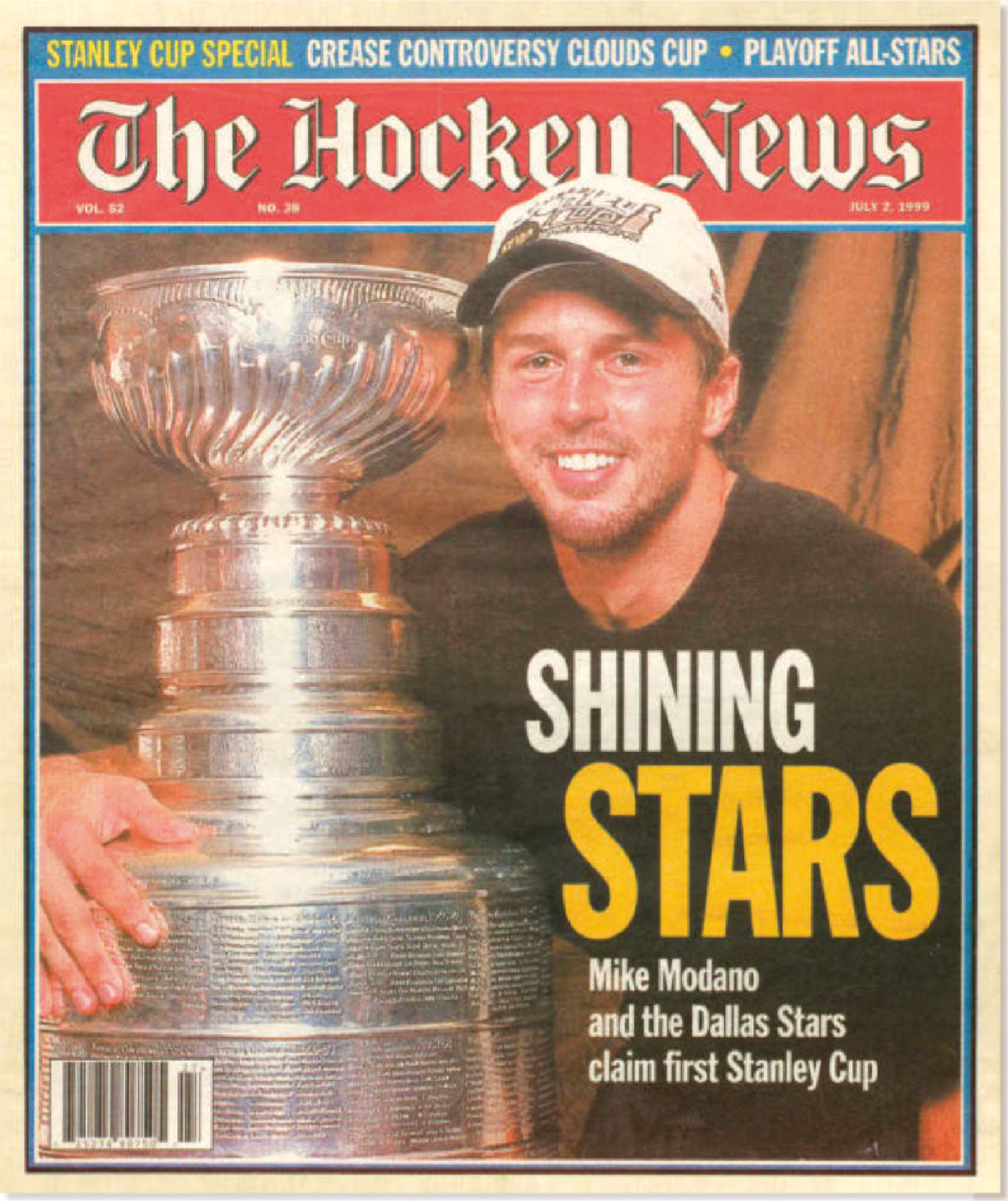
Vol. 52 / Issue 38

JULY 2, 1999

> GUIDING STAR

Our 2025 Cup pick, the Dallas Stars, have won it all just once. This spring, they'll be looking for someone to recreate the magic that Joe Nieuwendyk brought to the table back in 1999

BY **BOB MCKENZIE**


STANLEY CUP SPECIAL
CREASE CONTROVERSY CLOUDS CUP • PLAYOFF ALL-STARS
The Hockey News
VOL. 52
NO. 38
JULY 2, 1999
SHINING STARS
Mike Modano and the Dallas Stars claim first Stanley Cup

FOR CONN SMYTHE TROPHY winner Joe Nieuwendyk, it was once more with feeling. A more special feeling, at that.

When Nieuwendyk was a 22-year-old winning his first Stanley Cup with the Calgary Flames in 1989, it was wonderful. Just wonderful.

But to do it 10 years later as a veteran leader of the Dallas Stars, and the playoff MVP to boot, well, let's just say the native of Whitby, Ont., now has a finer appreciation of the degree of difficulty.

"This feels incredible," Nieuwendyk said after the triple-overtime nailbiter in Game 6 against the Buffalo Sabres. "When I first won the Cup, I was a little naive. We had such a good team and I expected there'd be more, but here we are, it's 10 years later and now you realize what a battle it is getting through it, with all the adversity of injuries. It has been a great ride."

Nieuwendyk knows of what he speaks.

A year ago, his post-season ended before it began, when San Jose Sharks defenseman Bryan Marchment rubbed him out against the end boards early in Game 1. Nieuwendyk sustained knee injuries that required season-ending surgeries.

Talk about comebacks.

This time around, Nieuwendyk led all playoff scorers with 11 goals. He tied Joe Sakic's playoff record with six game-winning goals. He stepped up his play in Game 3 – he scored both goals in a 2-1 win in Buffalo – when it looked as though Mike Modano's effectiveness might be limited because of a fractured bone in his wrist.

"It was so tough last year not to be a part of the playoffs," Nieuwendyk said. "I just felt like I was really excited about coming into this year's playoffs.

"It just felt like I wanted to lay it all on the line and have fun because I know what it takes to go to the end here."

What it took was an incredible amount of desire and devotion to rehabilitate his ravaged knees.

"I was forced to find out how hot it was in Dallas all summer," Nieuwendyk said. "It was a tough summer, I won't lie about it."

But the words, Stars coach Ken Hitchcock said, don't begin to tell the whole story of the torture Nieuwendyk endured at the hands of Dallas strength and conditioning coach J.J. McQueen.

"Jim McQueen put Joe through hell," Hitchcock said. "It was painful for me to watch because when it was 100 degrees outside, Jimmy made Joe put on a harness and haul him around in the parking lot on a tire. Jimmy pushed the hell out of him.

"I would go out there and say, 'Look, it's 104 degrees, let's calm this down a little.' Joe deserves a lot of credit."

Nieuwendyk had other motivational forces at work, too.

Ever since his mother Joanne passed away four years ago after a battle with cancer, she has been a part of his daily thoughts, even during games.

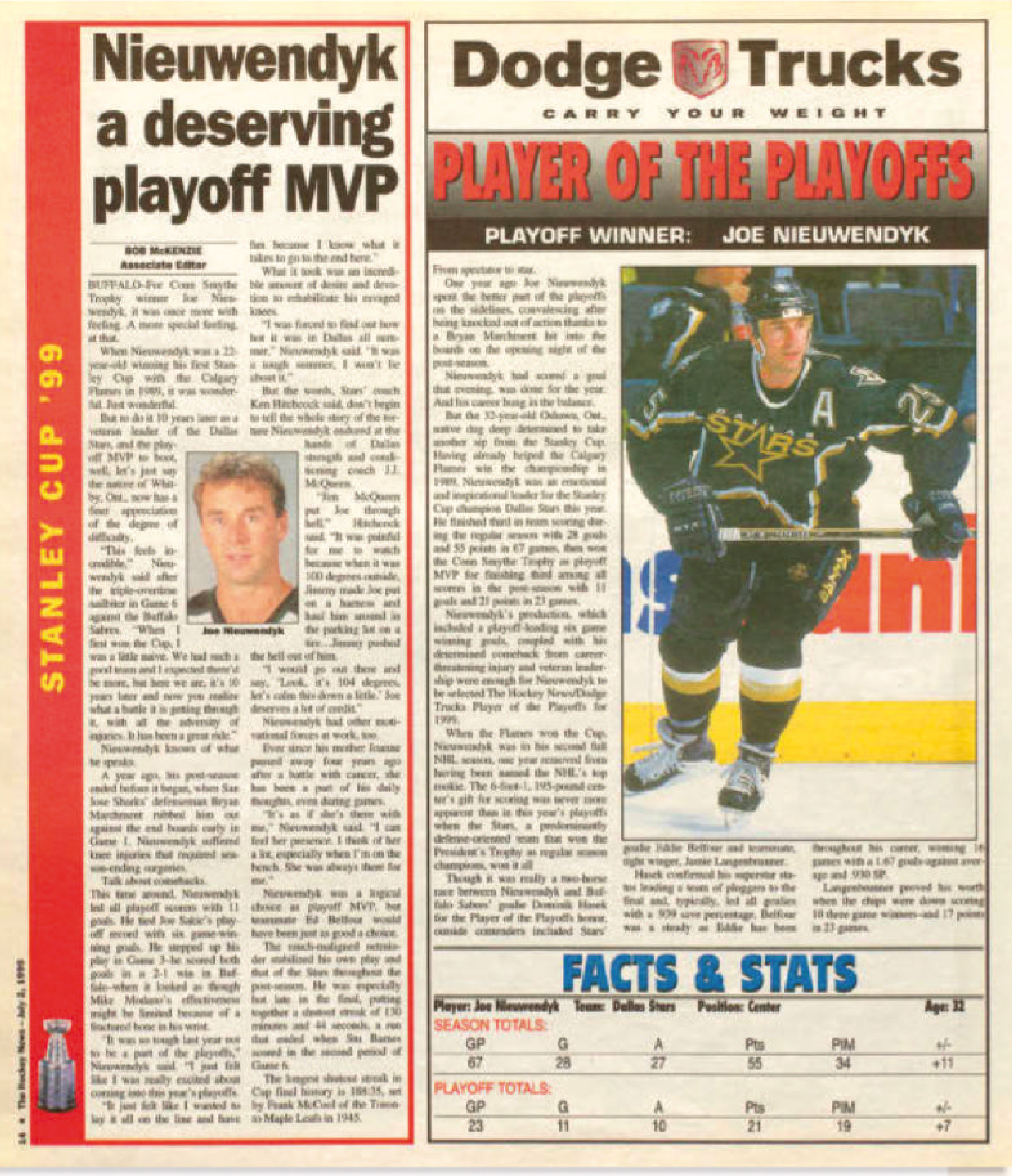
"It's as if she's there with me," Nieuwendyk said. "I can feel her presence. I think of her a lot, especially when I'm on the bench. She was always there for me."

Nieuwendyk was a logical choice as playoff MVP, but teammate Ed Belfour would have been just as good a choice.

The much-maligned netminder stabilized his own play and that of the Stars throughout the post-season. He was especially hot late in the final, putting together a shutout streak of 130 minutes and 44 seconds, a run that ended when Stu Barnes scored in the second period of Game 6.

The longest shutout streak in Cup final history is 188:35, set by Frank McCool of the Toronto Maple Leafs in 1945.

> **“**WHEN I FIRST WON THE CUP, I WAS A LITTLE NAIVE. **TEN YEARS LATER, YOU REALIZE WHAT A BATTLE IT IS** – **JOE NIEUWENDYK**



STANLEY CUP '99

Nieuwendyk a deserving playoff MVP

BOB McKENZIE
Associate Editor

BUFFALO–For Conn Smythe Trophy winner Joe Nieuwendyk, it was once more with feeling. A more special feeling, at that.

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Joe Nieuwendyk

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14 • The Hockey News • July 2, 1999

Dodge Trucks
CARRY YOUR WEIGHT

PLAYER OF THE PLAYOFFS

PLAYOFF WINNER: JOE NIEUWENDYK

From spectator to star.

One year ago Joe Nieuwendyk spent the better part of the playoffs on the sidelines, convalescing after being knocked out of action thanks to a Bryan Marchment hit into the boards on the opening night of the post-season.

Nieuwendyk had scored a goal that evening, was done for the year. And his career hung in the balance.

But the 32-year-old Oshawa, Ont., native dug deep determined to take another sip from the Stanley Cup. Having already helped the Calgary Flames win the championship in 1989, Nieuwendyk was an emotional and inspirational leader for the Stanley Cup champion Dallas Stars this year. He finished third in team scoring during the regular season with 28 goals and 55 points in 67 games, then won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP for finishing third among all scorers in the post-season with 11 goals and 21 points in 23 games.

Nieuwendyk's production, which included a playoff-leading six game-winning goals, coupled with his determined comeback from career-threatening injury and veteran leadership were enough for Nieuwendyk to be selected The Hockey News/Dodge Trucks Player of the Playoffs for 1999.

When the Flames won the Cup, Nieuwendyk was in his second full NHL season, one year removed from having been named the NHL's top rookie. The 6-foot-1, 195-pound center's gift for scoring was never more apparent than in this year's playoffs when the Stars, a predominantly defense-oriented team that won the President's Trophy as regular season champions, won it all.

Though it was really a two-horse race between Nieuwendyk and Buffalo Sabres' goalie Dominik Hasek for the Player of the Playoffs honor, outside contenders included Stars' goalie Eddie Belfour and teammate, right winger, Jamie Langenbrunner.

Hasek confirmed his superstar status leading a team of pluggers to the final and, typically, led all goalies with a .939 save percentage. Belfour was as steady as Eddie has been throughout his career, winning 16 games with a 1.67 goals-against average and .930 SP.

Langenbrunner proved his worth when the chips were down scoring 10 three game winners–and 17 points in 23 games.

FACTS & STATS

Player: Joe Nieuwendyk **Team: Dallas Stars** **Position: Center** **Age: 32**

SEASON TOTALS:

GP	G	A	Pts	PIM	+/-
67	28	27	55	34	+11

PLAYOFF TOTALS:

GP	G	A	Pts	PIM	+/-
23	11	10	21	19	+7

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6 Days in Ukraine
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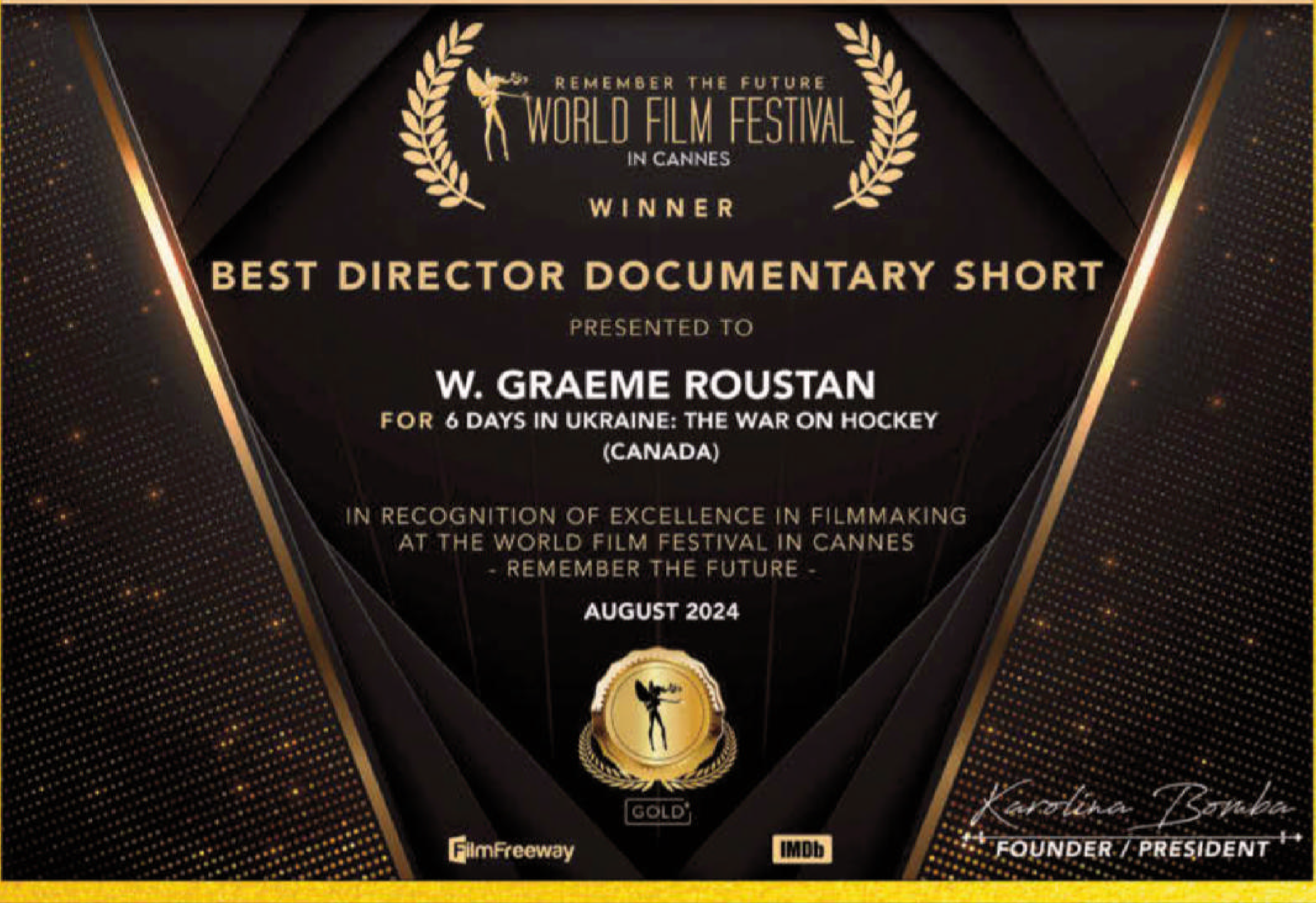

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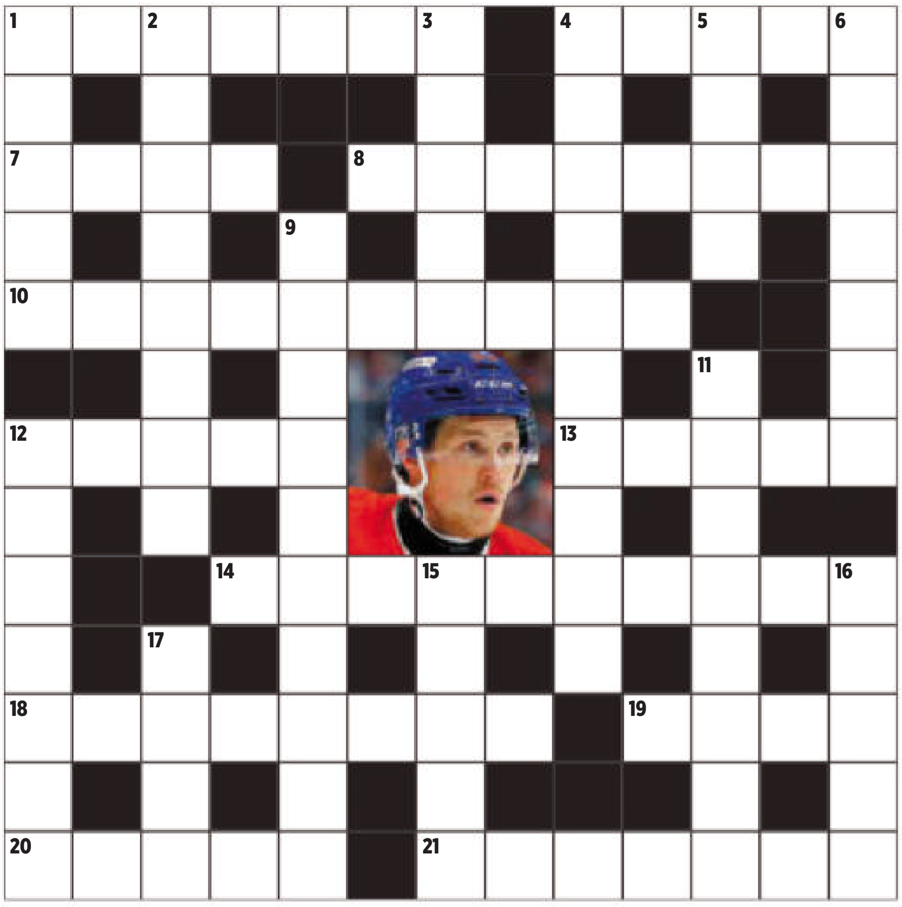
CROSSWORD

BY LARRY HUMBER



ACROSS

1 The world ___ is the informal name of an IIHF event for under-20 players
4 Johnny ___ was among the last unmasked goalies, eventually donning one in 1968-69.
7 Cups
8 Foster Hewitt Award winner who's called over 3,000 Leaf games
10 Russian-born winger with Carolina
12 ___ Dame Fighting Irish
13 Hits hard
14 Positioning
18 Dealing with a single opponent, going ___-___-___
19 Green twice nominated for the Norris Trophy
20 Struck with a lower leg joint
21 Left winger with the Oilers, pictured

DOWN

1 Pounces on a loose puck, ___ on a rebound
2 Leaves alone
3 Letters that appear on sweaters worn by Team Finland
4 'Badger Bob' steered the Flames and Pens
5 The late Chris Simon's hometown
6 Kitchener's OHL club
9 Came close to scoring
11 The Atlantic is one, as is the Metropolitan
12 City that's had NHL hockey since 1925
15 Tanti and Twist
16 A.J. who is a Panther
17 Feint or fake

Hockey TRIVIA

> BEGINNER:
It should really come as no surprise that the player pictured above is the NHL's leader in career playoff goals among active players. Who is he?

> INTERMEDIATE:
In 1971, Ken Dryden became the first rookie to be named playoff MVP. Which fellow goalie is the most-recent rookie to raise the Conn Smythe Trophy?

> EXPERT:
Last spring, Connor McDavid became the second skater to win the Conn Smythe Trophy despite his team losing the Cup final. Who was the first?

Word SEARCH

These are the 10 men who took home Conn Smythe honors between 2000 and 2010

2000s Conn Smythe Winners

X	Q	Y	V	E	D	U	F	P	W	Q	Z	A	G	W
E	M	P	O	H	F	P	C	A	P	J	S	D	Q	N
C	A	D	H	B	E	O	W	Y	G	X	J	V	D	G
L	L	H	E	R	E	U	G	I	G	A	J	K	C	R
R	K	I	N	I	E	D	E	R	M	A	Y	E	R	E
N	I	I	Z	Q	G	Q	K	M	C	B	J	U	P	B
A	N	C	G	D	D	C	F	R	D	V	W	G	R	R
M	W	C	H	M	O	R	T	S	D	I	L	R	L	E
X	D	H	O	A	R	C	D	V	Z	H	I	X	U	T
O	S	F	V	O	R	H	A	F	U	D	R	X	T	T
W	S	V	Y	C	H	D	O	G	J	T	B	M	B	E
T	M	Z	D	W	N	L	S	L	C	R	O	Z	D	Z
Y	L	Y	Z	R	V	O	N	Y	V	B	U	E	F	W
O	R	U	Z	H	A	F	J	C	U	E	J	W	W	R
S	R	H	V	S	D	W	S	N	E	V	E	T	S	S

STEVENS
ROY
LIDSTROM
GIGUERE
RICHARDS
WARD
NIEDERMAYER
ZETTERBERG
MALKIN
TOEWS

PUCK PUZZLE

Can your hockey brain bring its A-game? The challenge is on!

Hockey runs in some families, and there are seven former NHLers listed here whose sons followed in their footsteps. Fill in the blanks to discover another hockey family, whose name will appear in the red boxes.

S ___ M ___ ___ L ☐ ___ ___ N
D ___ N ___ ☐ O
N ___ ___ ☐ ___ D ___ R
D ___ B ___ ___ ☐ K
R ___ ___ N H ___ ___ ☐
K ___ P ___ ☐ ___ N
C ___ ☐ C ___ ___ ___ N

CROSSWORD SOLUTION: ACROSS 1. JUNIORS, 4. BOWER, 7. MUGS, 8. JOE BOWEN, 10. SVECHNIKOV, 12. NOTRE, 13. NAILS, 14. STATIONING, 18. ONE-ON-ONE, 19. MIKE, 20. KNEED, 21. SKINNER
DOWN 1. JUMPS, 2. NEGLECTS, 3. SUOMI, 4. BOB JOHNSON, 5. WAWA, 6. RANGERS, 9. THREATENED, 11. DIVISION, 12. NEW YORK, 15. TONYS, 16. GREER, 17. DEKE
TRIVIA ANSWERS: ALEX OVECHKIN, CAM WARD, REGGIE LEACH **PUCK PUZZLE SOLUTION:** SAMUELSSON, DONATO, NYLANDER, DEBRUSK, REINHART, KAPANEN, CHYCHRUN (FINAL ANSWER: STASTNY)

CROSSWORD: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES; TRIVIA: TOM SZCZERBOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS COPYRIGHT TOM SZCZERBOWSKI

[THE LAST WORD]

WITH RYAN KENNEDY | 𝕏 @THNRYANKENNEDY

HURRICANE TRADE WINDS
Carolina acquired Rantanen from Colorado in January – then, when they couldn't strike a deal, sent him to Dallas in March.

NHL

THUMBS-UP FOR WIN-NOW

There's only one goal in the NHL: win the Stanley Cup. And if the pursuit of a championship means losing a star for nothing in the summer, so be it

THE TRADE DEADLINE BROUGHT us all manner of shocks and surprises, but it also showcased several different management philosophies.

To wit: the Carolina Hurricanes had to decide whether or not to deal the recently acquired Mikko Rantanen, as the chances of re-signing the pending UFA over the summer seemed quite remote. The result was an excellent trade for the Dallas Stars, who were able to ink Rantanen to a new eight-year pact worth $96 million – and a body-blow to the Hurricanes' depth chart. While rookie Logan Stankoven is already showing the makings of being a legit top-six forward, he's still at the beginning of his pro journey. Meanwhile, Rantanen is an in-his-prime top scorer, as is Martin Necas – the original price for Carolina when they obtained Rantanen from Colorado in the first place.

In contrast, and albeit with lesser stakes, Columbus Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell held on to pending UFA blueliner Ivan Provorov. The Blue Jackets were not guaranteed a playoff spot on deadline day, but they were in the mix as a wild-card team, and Waddell had been clear in the days prior that he didn't want to subtract from a squad that had been playing so well and working so hard. Waddell wasn't wrong. The Blue Jackets, slated by many observers to be one of the league's basement-dwellers this season, instead have been a feel-good story. The plucky underdogs have come together to fight tooth and nail against the big boys.

There's always the chance that the Blue Jackets lose Provorov in the summer for no return, but if Columbus ultimately does make the post-season, there's a good argument to be made that it was all worth it. Columbus fans would surely be happier with at least a couple of home playoff dates rather than a second-round pick that may or may not turn into an NHLer down the road.

Asset management is a fascinating subject for NHL teams. Let's say Carolina did not trade Rantanen at the deadline. Even if he didn't want to play in Raleigh long-term, he's a pro and undoubtedly would have tried his best to win a Stanley Cup with the Hurricanes. If the Canes went all the way and lost him to free agency in the summer, every fan would take that bargain with a smile. Take it from a Toronto Raptors fan who got one season of Kawhi Leonard and an NBA championship parade at the end – it's worth it. I don't even care that the Raptors have been bad almost every year since.

It's also worth noting that in this era, you never actually lose a player for "nothing." You get cap space in return. The Tampa Bay Lightning held on to pending UFA Steven Stamkos last season, and while they didn't re-sign their erstwhile captain, the money freed up by his exit allowed them to bring in Jake Guentzel.

Many contenders will face this choice over the summer as well. In Toronto, Mitch Marner needs a new contract. And because everything in Leafs Nation is a major story, the fact he was the potential return in a Rantanen-to-Toronto deal had some locals questioning whether the super-skilled right winger will sign another deal or join another franchise come July.

With the salary cap set to rise significantly over the next three years, Marner could command $12 million or more on the open market. If the Leafs stumble in the playoffs once again, there'll be a lot of soul-searching in town, especially when it comes to roster construction. Both Marner and John Tavares are pending UFAs, and if the Leafs don't make a long run this season, it's only fair to wonder if a dramatic re-imagining of the top six would be in play. Would they run it back again with Marner and Tavares, or could they go an entirely different direction by snagging other UFAs with that cap space? For example, Florida's Sam Bennett and Winnipeg's Nikolaj Ehlers. With that pair, Toronto may gain some cap space, too.

MITCH **MARNER**

Only one team hoists the Cup, and, therefore, only one team truly wins the trade deadline in the short term. You have to put your team in the best position to succeed now. Never forget: banners fly forever, no matter who is still on the squad in the fall.

RANTANEN: DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES; MARNER: DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

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